Charles Wright’s Seasonal Poetry: The Inscrutable, Spiritual Landscape and Ars Poetica

Marian Jeanette Kelleher

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Abstract: Charles Wright’s Seasonal Poetry: The Inscrutable, Spiritual Landscape and Ars Poetica

By Marian Jeanette Kelleher

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This thesis argues that several of Charles Wright’s poems use shifting natural images, fragmented form and metapoetics to comment on the uncertain nature of the metaphysical world. “China Traces” opens the thesis by exploring the adequacy of words to match nature’s completeness. “China Traces” specifically uses the natural image of light, calling on the poetic legacy of Emily Dickinson. Another poem, “Returned to Yaak Cabin, I Overhear an Old Greek Song,” seems to freeze a moment, calling upon mortality and the permanence of art. The final poem in Chapter 1 is “Local Journal,” which, set at the end of November, calls on both a theatre motif and Christian imagery to accompany the natural imagery of autumnal transition. Chapter 2 explores poems set in autumn. Wright’s “Indian Summer” has many elements in common with Dickinson’s “These are the days when Birds come back,” including an attention to the existential discomfort of unseasonable warmth in autumn. The followup, “Indian Summer II” reprises this uncertainty, making use of frequent repetition and engagement with institutional religion. “October” and October II” address the colder days of autumn, and, like “Local Journal” focus on a transitional moment that symbolizes constant shifts of nature. Wright’s form and wordplay in “October II” in particular mimic the shifting seasons and again show skepticism about the metaphysical realm. The final chapter addresses two of Wright’s “Ars Poetica” poems. The first “Ars Poetica” calls on the legacy of Wallace Stevens and has many aspects that aesthetically link it to visual art. “Ars Poetica II” compares poetry to death and God. Ultimately this thesis works to analyze Charles Wright’s notions that God, nature and language cannot be extricated from one another.
CHARLES WRIGHT'S SEASONAL POETRY: THE INSCRUTABLE, SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE AND ARS POETICA

A THESIS

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by

MARIAN JEANETTE KELLEHER

Montclair State University

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“Everything must be temporary if it’s going to be permanent” (Halflife 28).

Chapter 1: Landscapes, Absences, Audience Awareness

Charles Wright, 1983 National Book Award and 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet, writes poems with natural imagery that, as a body of work, become a lingua franca linking the symbolism of seasons’ physical manifestations to the metaphysical realm. His speaker appears as a skeptic with an attraction to Christian narratives and occasionally eschatology. While there is a long-standing tradition of using the beauty of nature to represent the ineffable spiritual realm, Wright’s poems avoid triteness because they complicate landscapes through metapoetics, making language another lens through which to approach the spiritual realm. Wright’s landscapes will not only never adequately convey the invisible world, but, ironically, the very words used to attempt to explain the invisible world further obscure metaphysics. Wright’s poems, however, are not infused with an irony that makes them seem insincere. Rather, Wright’s speaker acknowledges with a nod and a wink the seeming futility of expressing the inexpressible, and then looks again at the landscape and earnestly keeps trying.

Wright’s poems are saturated with seasonal imagery, yet Wright’s seasons are unpredictable and full of negatives as a way to posit that the metaphysical realm is inscrutable and uncertain. Wright frequently invokes absences, both in the form of natural images and in the typography of his poems. Just as the leaves fall leaving absences, and Wright’s lines are full of breaks as absences, there are absences and mysteries in humans’ understanding of the metaphysical realm. While the patterns of the seasons permeate Wright’s work, the seasons often show signs of blending with another and are shape-
shifters that defy easy understanding. By using the ephemeral patterns of nature, Wright’s speaker attempts to read the language of nature as a sort of guidebook for the metaphysical realm. However, Wright’s void-infused, unstable imagery subverts this. Leaves, winds, light and temperature become signals of nothing more than the concrete landscape, and all show the mutability and unpredictability of the physical realm.

Likewise, Wright’s lines are full of gaps and breaks, and as Wright himself and many critics have noted, seem disassembled and “restrung” (Gardner 70). Wright’s language is slippery and uncertain, like his seasons. In attempting to find a way of articulating the state of metaphysical reality, Wright’s seasonal poetry often also takes on elements of ars poetica. The metapoetics of Wright’s body of work function in some ways similarly to the slippery imagery of the seasons. A consciousness of shifting shape and form reflect both the seasons’ and the poems’ ability to be read many ways simultaneously.

Though not all of Wright’s landscapes have the traditional features of pastoral, some of his seasonal poems could be categorized as pastorals, and others have elements of a specific type of pastoral. In an essay about the pastoral as a mode of poetry, David Baker paraphrases Frank Kermode’s theory that “Pastoral...depends upon an opposition between the simple, or natural, and the urbane or cultivated” (135). He continues, “the pastoral can become a vehicle for poetic speculation on religious mysteries...and also on poetry itself” (135). Baker’s notion that the pastoral is both fit for “speculation of religious mysteries” and “poetry itself” is apt in terms of Wright’s body of work.

Wright’s meditations on nature sometimes fall into this mode of pastoral, as they often expose the reader to a simple landscape observed through a lens that acknowledges a
reader. The tension of the opposing simplicity and urbanity lends depth in poems that
seek to understand a seemingly complex metaphysical other world.

"China Traces," one of Wright's poems from the 2011 collection *Bye and Bye*,
while not wholly a pastoral, has elements of Baker's definition of pastoral. It is not a
poem of remote setting, rolling hills or flocks of sheep, but rather a poem of disjointed
natural images and an awareness of reader. While this specific poem comes later in his
career, Wright titled an earlier collection *China Trace*, indicating that an interest in China
traces has been a career-long pursuit. Wright explains what a China trace is:

I have always loved the phrase *Natchez Trace*. It has a wonderful sound. Trace
being a road to somewhere, of course. So this would be the China trace, the
attempt to follow the road to a Chinese resolution of certain emotional aspirations
that I've been talking about. *Trace* is a rich word; even in these days of
deconstructionism, traces are very big things. They are the things that have been
erased or that are shadowy, things that you know but can only get outlines of.

*(Halflife 133)*

In Wright's poems, and specifically "China Traces," the "shadowy" and mysterious
things are often associated with the spiritual realm. The whole of "China Traces" is
fragmented and gap-littered. Looking at the poem on the page, parts of lines seem
redacted; vast tracts of white between words and lines suggest something missing or
unseen. This is characteristic of Wright's later style in particular, and most certainly
reflects the ideas of absence and the "shadowy" things that the poem suggests. In the
same interview, McBride asks how Wright wrote *China Trace* in such an "obviously
painterly" way, and Wright responds, "my poems are mostly landscapes, both interior
and exterior” and continues “you find the poet in the landscape and emotion coming back out of it” (132). In other words, just by entitling the poem “China Traces” Wright suggests the poet’s presence in the landscape, and an awareness of the reader. “China Traces” is a poem about what is under the surface of the visible from the outset.

The poem “China Traces” begins with nature. The speaker postulates, “Nature contains no negatives./Nothing is lost there./ The word is. Except the word.” (1-3). The first two lines make a confident assertion about the qualities of nature; it contains “no negatives,” “nothing is lost there,” and therefore nature is comprehensible and cyclical, where matter regenerates itself. However, he introduces this idea with the words “no,” “negatives,” “nothing” and “lost,” already suggesting absence and void. This absence and void, though, is not in nature itself, however, but in the ability of “the word” to convey this. The second line “Nothing is lost there” is pushed far to the right, past the word “negatives” even from line 1, suggesting something has been omitted. The white space between the words “negatives” and “Nothing” already suggests the follow-up line “The word is. Except the word” (3). The white space between lines 1 and 2 seems to hold a place for a lost word that would name something ineffable about the completeness of nature. While nature contains no negatives, language does. If being in the natural world is an experience of sacred completeness, the speaker of the poem clearly feels frustrated with language’s ability to convey that. These first few lines create the framework of nature, religion and ars poetica of Baker’s definition immediately. There is a deep examination of poetry’s relationship to nature here, and Wright seems to be expressing the failure of language to convey an absolute about nature. He acknowledges that the words in his poems can’t compete with nature, because in nature “Nothing is lost,” save
the attempts to actually articulate what nature is. The blank space, acknowledgment of a lost word, and the completeness of nature all suggest that the experience of reading about nature cannot compete with the experience of being in nature. This metapoetic moment is asking the reader to consider the way language fails to replicate the completeness of the natural world, yet it certainly does not condemn language, as it is using language to convey this point.

The third line “The word is. Except the word” makes for a curious moment. Why not “words are”? The singularity of “the word” evokes religious connotations. Often the Bible is referred to as “the Word.” However, even if one doesn’t attach biblical significance to the phrase, which seems plausible considering “word” is a common noun here, a sacred quality is given to its being singular rather than plural. This is no missing collection of words, but rather the word. Even the syntax of this third line is hesitant. The caesura between “is” and “Except” again causes a pause or break and emphasizes the dissonant or uncertain ideas. One could read this line as a sort of break in thought again. The word is what? It almost seems to require another word to complete the metaphor. The word is “lost” of course when connected to the previous line, but read with the integrity of this being its own line “The word is. Except the word” seems utterly ambiguous and incomplete. However, one could also read “The word is” as a powerful assertion about the existence of “the word.” With a clear full stop of the period “The word is” make the statement that the word is exists—it is real and vital and an exception to the laws of nature. Like the statement in the New Testament, John 1:1, “In the beginning there was the Word,” the poem could be read as a veneration of the primacy of words. Again this undermines the certainty of the poem.
Already in the first three lines a series of ambiguous statements about the relationship of language and nature form a complex view of real and unreal. The statements seem a series of hesitations—corrections even. A categorical statement opens the poem, “Nature contains no negatives,” but then the next several lines provide exceptions—“The word is. Except the word.”—and possible contradictions in certain readings—“Nothing is lost...Except the word.” This lack of commitment to a single idea in the progression of ideas—the fragmentation and seeming erasures and qualifiers—seem to be hint further at both the power and inadequacy of language. Because line 3 is so ambiguous, in that it could be read as actually a statement of the word’s power, i.e., “The word is,” or a statement of language’s inadequacy, i.e., that the word is lost in nature, language is both venerated and questioned, in the same way Wright often both venerates and questions spiritual matters.

The second stanza of “China Traces” begins “In spring there is autumn in my heart” (4). While it may be physically spring in the poem, the speaker does not feel the typical associations of warmth, growth and youth of the season. Rather, the speaker’s heart counters the season’s physical reality with the impression of autumn, the season most typically associated with decline and movement toward death. Death may be the ultimate absence the poem conveys with its series of breaks and voids. While nature may be present and full of spring-like vitality, this vitality is overshadowed by the other side of the binary—absence and death. The next line certainly seems to confirm this feeling of existential angst: “My spirit, outside of nature, like a slow mist in the trees,/ Looking for somewhere to dissipate” (5-6). His spirit, a symbol of the metaphysical realm, or life after death, is part of nature, and yet is “outside of nature.” His heart betrays the reality of the
season by feeling like autumn, and he says his spirit is “outside of nature” yet he uses a natural simile of something changing and disappearing, “like slow mist in trees” to convey his notion of the potentially dissipating spirit. If his spirit is “outside of nature,” why then compare it to something natural? This is a paradoxical element of the poem. Why use a natural image of something that suggests negativity or absence (in that mist obscures landscapes, but is also constantly shifting and intangible)? Wright is conflating the natural and spiritual realm here again. Interestingly, this is the only stanza of the poem where all of the lines begin flush left. Perhaps this stanza is the most confident in its simile to nature. Perhaps having autumn in one’s heart in spring, and comparing one’s spirit to dissipating mist is the most confident the speaker is about conveying the essence of nature as a complete and sacred place where “Nothing is lost.” The lack of physical gaps in the lines certainly suggests more confidence than the other lines.

With this sense of confidence, the speaker begins the next stanza with the line “I write out charms and spells.” The charms and spells can almost certainly be read as poems, again lending metapoetic awareness, as the poem itself then is acting as a charm or spell. The speaker of the poem writes in order perhaps to ward off that feeling of “autumn in [his] heart,” attempting to elevate the power of words. Here, words are imbued with a magical power. As a continuation of the second stanza’s feeling of confidence, words are magical and have power against the passage of time, that is, “Against the passage of light” (8). This suggests that the speaker feels that words can have some power to stop the passage of time, or make the speaker immortal. However, the confidence of this power in words does not last long. The whole third stanza reads:

I write out my charms and spells
Against the passage of light

and gathering evil

Each morning. Each evening hands them back. (7-10)

After six lines flush left with natural line breaks and few midline caesurae, “and
gathering evil” interrupts after a gaping white space. As before, the line “and gathering
evil” is set apart as a means of expressing some absence here. Perhaps the blank space
emphasizes the lack of gathering “good.” The other side of the binary to evil, “good” is a
possible way to “fill in the blank.” The white space, or negative, urges a suggestion of
presence, by urging the reader to ask what is missing. The spell of confidence against
passing light is broken in this line however one reads it, though, and the follow up line
only further emphasizes the feeling that once again the “charms and spells” or language
have no power in relationship to nature. The charms and spells are offered in the
morning, or symbolic youth, against the gathering evil, but the evening, or symbolic
death, “hands them back” suggesting that charms and spells really have no power after
all, or perhaps just transient power. The speaker is again feeling mortal and powerless in
spite of words.

Throughout the poem, the contradictions and paradoxes continue. Wright’s
absences become presences, and line 11 emphasizes this point with the double negative
“Out of the nothing nothing comes,” which is reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’ “The
Snow Man,” another poem concerned with the absences embedded in seasonal imagery. The repetition of the word “nothing” in “China Traces” confounds certainty. Again, the
following line begins after a vast gap, echoing the absence of the nothing. Lines 12-15
read:
The rain keeps falling,
As we expected, the bitter and boundaryless rain.
The grass leaves no footprints,
   the creek keeps on eating its one word.

Because the rain keeps falling, it is a reliable feature of nature, whereas the spiritual realm is not reliable at all as the entire poem argues. The white space again indicates the uncertain metaphysical realm, with no words to convey it, but the rain is present, with a word to modify it. Once again though, while the rain is reliable, it is also something that changes and is composed of many fluid parts, rather than one form. Rain is part of the complete cycles of nature, a mutable element that will fall, join groundwater, combine and separate, evaporate and join the atmosphere again as mist and rain. It is part of the complete whole of nature, yet it does not stay stable or constant in spite of its predictability. Unlike stones or mountains, which shift over the course of centuries, Wright uses fast shifting natural images. Like the light and mist, Wright uses water to convey the presence of nature, but, naturally, uses an image of something mutable. The rain is both “expected,” as well as “bitter and boundaryless.” It is a shapeless natural image, which suggests something uncertain or uncomfortable. This is not a pleasant spring rain, that suggests growth, but a bitter, unending rain, something like an autumn rain suggesting a death with doubt of an afterlife. In this line there is also a notable shift from the singular “I” narrator from earlier in the poem to the first person plural “we.” The speaker is speaking for a group, perhaps all of humanity and the constant mortal search for what follows life.
In the next line, the grass that “leaves no footprints” speaks to nature’s lack of communication and the human insistence on trying to find “footprints” or symbols where there are none in nature. Wright writes poems that use natural images over and over to make some sense of the abstract significance of nature’s symbols, but “China Traces,” a poem late in Wright’s prolific career, in some ways laments the failure of this endeavor. As the last line of the stanza puts it, “the creek keeps on eating its one word.” In other words, the creek seems to want to say something, but makes that word vanish, makes it an absence, just as the blank space before this line also does. Furthermore, in anthropomorphizing the creek through giving it the ability to “eat” a word, Wright layers metaphor upon metaphor, and shows just how complex language can be--to convey one idea, we go through layers of representation. Nature may seem to say something through its images, but that is just human projection. As in line 3, “word” here is singular, suggesting that a single word cannot explain what nature is. Perhaps it is a matter of infinite hope, but a collection of words, such a poem, rather than a single word, could catch some glimmer of the other world. The creek may eat its one word, and the word may be lost in nature, but the dozens of words in the poem serve some representation together of the metaphysical realm. Otherwise, why bother devoting a life to writing out “charms and spells”? The poem again both confirms and denies the power of language to convey the metaphysical realm. A poem expressing both the power and the failure of language is not novel, but Wright’s gaps make for silences that add to the tension.

The final couplet of the poem also uses a personified natural image, stars, and deconstructs the typical perception of stars containing light, and instead makes the light “assemble” stars. It reads:
In the night, the light assembles the stars,
and tightens their sash. (16-17)

Here, light, a common image for Wright, assembles the stars, rather than the stars just emanating light. The light, that fickle and transient quality, is given the faculty to assemble stars, and the characteristic of drawing in “by tighten[ing] their sash.” The stars seem to be concentrating themselves or making themselves smaller--tightening and shape shifting. Furthermore, he uses the internal rhyme of “night,” “light” and “tight” to draw our attention to the compression of this line. In his article about Wright’s fragmented poems, Gardner explains:

As with Dickinson, the light is so “luminous” that it seems to draw our eyes away from the world. It makes us aware of “what’s missing”—what is unseen or excluded from our view. It “subtracts” or “peel[s] away” some portion of the visible as we become aware that the visible is only part of the story and attempt to look beyond it. (Gardner 76-77)

Because light constantly changes and is intangible, it becomes an apt image to express the mysteries of the metaphysical realm. It is natural, revealing, and sometimes even obscuring, as Gardner suggests. Light can reveal what is before us, but it can draw our eyes and minds to what is not present. Light can be associated with life, especially with regards to nature for its essential function in photosynthesis, yet light is typically associated with death and religion, as well. Those who have had near-death experiences say they have seen the light at the end of the tunnel, and Christian iconography uses luminous shrouds and haloes to depict holiness. God is often depicted in paintings through crepuscular rays or shafts of light. Churches are constructed to filter light in
interesting ways, through stained glass windows and odd shaped windows and skylights.

Even the language and symbols of many Christian sects use light; Quakers speak of holding a person in “the light” as a way of honoring him or her, and Roman Catholics represent the Holy Ghost as a flame. Genesis begins with darkness, only have the first words God utter be, “Let there be light.”

Light is something that is fleeting and imbued with a sense of otherworldliness. It is therefore not surprising that it becomes a motif in many of Wright’s seasonal poems. Gardner also writes, “Testifying to a world that can’t be spoken for or reached, the slant of light, for both Dickinson and Wright, functions, paradoxically, as a ‘lifeline to the unseen’” (72). Wright is most certainly a disciple of Dickinson, and has even admitted, “Emily Dickinson’s poems, in their surreal simplicity and ache, are without question the artistic high ground, the city of light, in this uniquely American landscape” (Halflife 54).

Light seems for both poets the image that confirms what can’t be seen. Dickinson’s “slant of light,” is, not incidentally, also a light of a particular season. Dickinson’s light is a winter afternoon light, hailing all of the signs of death with its “Heavenly hurt” (5).

Like the end of “There’s a certain slant of light” where the “landscape listens” (13) and “shadows hold their breath” (14), Wright personifies his natural image, the stars, suggesting again how humans want to ascribe some sense of cosmic consciousness to the inscrutable landscapes. By closing “China Traces” with an image of light assembling and compressing itself, the poem suggests not only a world that “can’t be spoken for or reached” but also imagines one with a volition and human-like sentience through its actions. Wright certainly seems to suggest that there is some anthropomorphic and heavenly force behind the scrim of the physical realm. The ascription of human features
to the landscape echoes the notion that perhaps, but only perhaps, the metaphysical realm exists.

While "China Traces" does not depict a complete landscape, it does contain the fragments of natural imagery that suggest a landscape. As Wright himself admits, "My landscapes have always been imaginary, invented and reconstructed...the cement of abstractions that hold reality together--gets worked in" (Halflife 181). The fractured landscapes have light from the other world that shines through their cracks, as in "China Traces," where the mist in trees becomes that apt metaphor for the feeling of a spirit dissipating and the incongruous sense that "in spring there is autumn in my heart" (4). In "China Traces" and other seasonal poems of Wright's, there is no full picture of an idyllic pastoral landscape, such to suggest a resemblance to a utopia or heaven. Rather, the absences and incongruities of the poems provide glimpses of a possibility of such a realm and a deep desire for such certainty.

In her essay, "Charles Wright's 'Via Negativa': Language, Landscape, and the Idea of God," Bonnie Costello comments extensively on the voids that exist in Wright's poems and how they are related to his landscapes. She opens by saying Wright's "improvisatory sounding of the absolute is itself a condition of the modern, which is invested in no system of belief yet reifies the Void. His landscapes both express and produce these effects" (325). "China Traces" presents no absolute message about the existence of the other world, but rather, presents fragments and absences that suggest the possibility. Costello uses the frame of "Via Negativa" to show how the absences in Wright's poems actually become presences. While Costello never addresses "China Traces" directly, it seems that its "improvisatory sounding of the absolute...which is
invested in no system of belief” lies in the almost superstitious, mock-sacramental imaginings of spirit dissipating in trees and the writing of “charms and spells” (7). Later in the essay, Costello propounds, “Visual analogues of the negative principle appear throughout the poems: in seasonal metaphors (which Wright presents as compulsory repetitions of growth and divestiture, rather than signs of renewal and eternal continuity)” (342). The seasons do not represent an eternal cycle that suggests an eternal metaphysical realm, but rather, serve as reminders that death is imminent, even in spring. Costello concludes that “The pilgrim in Wright pursues disappearances, not presences” (345). The disappearances and voids hold more possibility for the existence of an ineffable world, as they do not commit to the ephemeral and often misleading patterns of nature. Likewise, Spiegelman, in his article "Landscape and Identity: Charles Wright's Backyard Metaphysics" says that Wright uses “places instead of people, moments instead of extended linear narratives” (4). Wright focuses on landscapes as doors to the metaphysical realm, a realm that Wright evokes through absence and void. Wright uses the fleeting elements of nature to illustrate a sense of connection to the invisible world.

He is exceedingly concerned with time, and perhaps the most telling hallmark of this is his continual mention of days, months, seasons, and years. However, he does have poems that seem to try to freeze moments to ward off the “passage of light.”

One of Wright’s poems, “Returned to the Yaak Cabin, I Overhear an Old Greek Song,” has elements that make it more clearly a pastoral than “China Traces.” Eric Pankey, speaking about “Returned to Yaak Cabin” in his essay on pastorals, explains: This poem like so many of Wright’s poems, is at once static and headlong. “We spend our whole lives in the same place and never leave,” he writes and then takes
the time to catalog the particular moment, which is never the same moment and thus never the same place twice. The moment of meditation is, like mythic time, constant and ongoing. (147)

“Returned to the Yaak Cabin,” a poem from the collection *Negative Blue*, is an earlier poem than “China Traces.” “Returned to Yaak Cabin” exhibits none of the breaks of “China Traces” in its form and in some ways on the surface seems a counter argument to the lack of certainty about another world. With two tidy, symmetrical septets, the poem echoes a sonnet, and has a repeated chorus of “We spend our whole lives in one place and never leave.” All of this seems to communicate a certainty and “mythic” existence of a state of familiar, comfortable and possibly Edenic.

However, there are elements that cast a shadow on this certainty and actually lend a superficially cheerful poem a certain eeriness. The poem begins:

Back at the west window, Basin Creek
Stumbling its mantra out in a slurred, midsummer monotone,
Sunshine in planes and clean sheets
Over the yarrow and lodgepole pine--

There are many notable elements here. This first phrase that stretches four lines is a qualifying clause to the following line “We spend our whole lives in one place and never leave.” It is not a complete sentence, but rather an impression and sentence fragment that ends in the Dickinson-esque dash. The speaker is indoors, which seems incongruent to the celebration of nature. Why situate a speaker listening to the mantra of the creek at a window rather than outside in the sunshine? Once again there is the homage to Dickinson with a speaker at the window. Perhaps the speaker feels a sense of disconnection or
distance from nature, and the incomprehensibility of nature’s language in the next line seems to support this. As in “China Traces” we have a running body of water attempting to communicate. This creek doesn’t eat its word here, but rather stumbles and slurs a monotone mantra, which is not exactly a clear articulation of some absolute. Again, nature seems to say something, but doesn’t exactly convey it clearly. Here again, we have the otherworldly sheets and planes of light, once more summoning Dickinson’s slant of light, but these shafts of light are set in midsummer, not winter. Even in the still moment of summer represented here, the light conjures those feelings of imminent mortality through its associations with spirituality and inevitable change. The eerie stillness of the poem also works to evoke a stillness possibly associated with death. The line that Pankey refers to, “We spend our whole lives in one place and never leave,” is both an affirmation of a possibly immortal, pastoral moment and a question about whether that is not just a human invention.

Lines 6-7 show activity in this ostensibly still moment. We have wildlife at work “Pine squirrels and butterflies at work in a deep dither,/ Bumblebee likewise” and “wind with a slight hitch in its get-along.” If there is movement from the creek’s mantra, the squirrels, butterflies, bumblebee, and wind, this is not a complete pause. The wildlife’s efforts are described as a “deep dither.” The word “dither” suggests agitation and movement, though not necessarily productive movement. Similarly the wind has a “hitch” in its “get-along,” meaning it is not achieving its ends. The whole scene has a sense of being a diorama with moving parts. There is no escaping the vignette, which doesn’t exactly seem Edenic, but, rather purgatorial in some way.
The next stanza has similar hints of disquiet. It begins, “Dead heads on the lilac bushes, daisies/ Long-legged forest of stalks in a white throw across the field.” Here death is directly mentioned with the death of lilacs, the flowers that so often are harbingers of warmer weather in spring, but are also poetically reminiscent of Whitman’s famous elegy for Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom’d.” The daisies’ having legs is another of the partial anthropomorphisms so common in poetry, yet they are unmoving, in a “throw.” The next two lines repeat the pattern from the first stanza in that they do not complete a sentence and instead end again in the Dickinson dash. They read “Above the ford and deer path/ Candor of marble, candor of bone--”. The repetition here of the phrase “Candor of” as well as the echoed formal elements and the follow up of the chorus in line 12, makes the stillness seem a stuck loop with variations rather than an exactly repeated moment or frozen moment. The formal elements belie the outward message that “We spend our whole lives in one place and never leave.” “Candor of bone” is a very interesting phrase in this light, as well. Wright is celebrating physicality. Bones and marble are honest and real. He is also playing with the varied denotations of candor, in the sense that bone is white and bright, lending richness to the line.

The last two lines draw in the metapoetics that permeate “China Traces.” Lines 13 and 14 read, “The head of Orpheus bobbing in the slatch, his song/ Still beckoning from his still-bloody lips, bright as a bee’s heart.” Again, death is conjured directly in a poem that seems to be on the surface about an immortal moment. An allusion to Orpheus, the mythological poet who brought his wife Eurydice back from the underworld, has all the trappings of a poem grappling with existential uncertainty. Orpheus wants to achieve immortality through his songs, as the project of art often does. Wright aknowledges
Orpheus' mortality as gruesome, true to the myth; he has bloodied lips emerging from a disembodied bobbing head in a slatch, or pause. Yet, he continues singing, and so achieves a kind of immortality through his song. The last line repeats the word “still” twice, playing with stillness and its associations that acknowledge a passage of time. Again, we are faced with a mortality that is simultaneously brutal and bloody and hopeful in that life, or art, go on after death.

While Wright attempts to freeze time in his poems on the surface, the speaker recognizes his mortality and the passing of time, and there is a deep need for reassurance that there is a design behind it all. Both “China Traces” and “Returned to Yaak Cabin” make vague allusions to Christian iconography and the invisible realm. “Local Journal,” however, seems rife with overt Christian symbolism, and often personifies the landscape. The mutability and unpredictability of Wright’s landscapes create a sense that the symbols of nature are like kind of natural theology—an attempt to explain a metaphysical realm with patterns and scenes. Wright admits, “I like to think the absence of people in my poems enhances their presence in the objects and landscapes” (*Halflife* 24). This suggests not only Wright’s familiarity with the fact of his absences actually becoming presences, but also his notion that there are sentient and anthropomorphic, though invisible, humanlike presences in his pastorals.

One poem that seems to be a poem rich with both corporal and Christian imagery comes right at the end of Wright’s collection of “Yard Journals” from *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*. “Local Journal,” another midcareer poem, is set at the barren end of autumn, yet is full of vivid and corporeal imagery. However, Wright uses words and phrases that suggest a very fleeting and intense shift that the land seems to be feeling as a
sentient being. In fact, in places in the poem, the elements of the landscape seem to be actors in a play, yet another form of writing and art. While this isn’t exactly metapoetic, it is another comment on the connection of art to nature. By using the language of drama, Wright provides another element of artifice to the poem. Theatre has a director and a playwright, artists who “engineer” the action, just as one could imagine a divine figure doing. “Local Journal” is a longer poem, over 50 lines, which, on the pages, weave in and out of blank space as though the words were drifting with the “fast-running clouds” that show up in the first stanza. The poem begins:

November in afterpiece,
transitional showdown,
Commedia dell’arte of months.

Above the morning, fast-running clouds
Scuttle and rain, then snow,
then break to a backdrop of Venetian blue.

Already we have the sense of a landscape at a moment of transition. Situated in November, the poem takes place at the moment where seasons typically symbolize a shift into the “death” of winter. It is an “afterpiece” though, something short and comical, and the sense of theatrical comedy is reinforced by the phrase “Commedia dell’arte of months.” The drama of what the speaker calls the moment a “transitional showdown” (2), is a drama cloaked in a sense of artifice, as though nature were a set. Again, we see the shifting and mutable, cyclical patterns in elements of nature--clouds, rain and snow.

The stanza continues with the line “Wind spills from the trees.” Typically wind does not “spill,” and so this line too has a sense of particular drama and extremity. The
poem continues the theatrical conceit with “How much, thrums Expiation, half/ Asleep in the wings, how much will it add up to?” (8-9). Here, Expiation is personified, but as a less than key player in the drama, rather, as a half asleep backstage being. Expiation, with all of its religious connotations of atonement, is behind the scenes, not visible, but still taking part in the action. It asks “how much will it add up to,” seemingly asking what the point of the whole theatrical scene is. Expiation elicits a response from the clouds though, the clouds who seem like the lead role of the play thus far: “Always the same answer out of the clouds, / always the same sigh.” The personified clouds seem frustrated to have the question “how much” presented. They sigh and present an idea that seems tiresome and has been presented before, though their answer is left ambiguous. In this stanza, nature takes precedence over the seemingly lazy Expiation, half- asleep and thrumming backstage. Perhaps what the line suggests is that the very notion of atonement represents some sense of laziness; why commit an act for which one must atone in the first place? Both Expiation and the clouds seem tired, in any case, world-weary and ready for a change.

The next several lines assert the reality of the invisible realm though as a follow-up to the drama of the sky.

The void exists, and enters heaven with the infinite breath,

Pythagoras said,

beginning first in the numbers:

Those who have come for punishment must then be punished,

Don’t dandle, don’t speak in the dark.
Objects do not exist.

by convention sweet, by convention bitter. (12-18)

Here, there seems to be a voice of ancient wisdom, Pythagoras’, confirming that the invisible realm, the realm beyond the curtain of the sky and clouds’ drama, is real and demands attention. If the void exists, and objects don’t, as this set of lines indicates, physical matter becomes unimportant, and there is a sense of urgency to expiation or atoning. Punishment must be given for those who seek it. There is a definite statement of a need to atone for sin here, then, which seems to indicate a belief in the metaphysical realm beyond the scrim of the physical drama. Wright invokes Pythagoras to chastise Expiation for laziness and its backstage role. He warns not to “dandle” and “speak in the dark,” which whether read in a secular or spiritual fashion, advises openly admitting and receiving punishment for transgression. Whether cloaked in the language of religion as sin or as a secular act of transgression, immorality must be atoned for.

The next set of lines does what Wright often does, which is question what he puts forth with a quick turn of phrase. The next stanza begins,

Still, you could have fooled me,

my left hand in the juniper bush

At three in the afternoon,

My right with pruning shears

Cutting the sticks of rhododendron back. (19-24)

Just as nature seems at a critical moment of shift, the speaker self-consciously manipulates the actual landscape as the poem works to figuratively manipulate the landscape. One can imagine the pruning process like the process of shaping words in a
poem. However, even taken literally as an image of the speaker cutting branches, there are significant details here. Why does the speaker have his left hand in the juniper bush while he trims the rhododendron with his right? Left has conventional association with evil, the Romans having lent English the word “sinister” from the direction “sinistra,” and the left hand here is idle while the right hand is at work. Yet juniper is a hale and hearty evergreen while rhododendron is a fragile, bright, almost flame-like seasonal bloom. Again, there is a vernal image in a poem set at the dead end of autumn, as in “China Traces.” The incongruity of the image lends that existential discomfort again and situates several other binaries among the physical versus metaphysical binary—left/right, good/evil, evergreen/deciduous, bright/dull and so on. They show the extremes on continua, just how the speaker of the poem struggles to delineate the physical from spiritual. The simple act of trimming a bush becomes a stand in for the mysteries of the universe.

Additionally, the next several lines further situate the poem in the concrete landscape but complicate it with a sense of both Christian vocabulary and timelessness. “Trailing trash cans to the curb,” line 25 reads, situating the speaker in a mundane task while contemplating the mysteries of the universe. Likewise, the “raw rood of the power pole” (26), also complicates the scene with a Christian overtone. The rood, or crucifix of a power line is both raw and evocative of spirituality and human creation, conflating the two. Before a break in the poem indicated by a line between stanzas, the speaker pauses meaningfully, saying, “Such oleaginous evenings.../ Time is another country” (27-28). The ellipses, blank space before line 28 and the clear break in the poem all indicate a sense of lingering on the invisible. Time being another country also suggests a sense of
time being foreign or defamiliarized; it loses its meaning. Time doesn’t seem to exist for the “void” that exists or the other realm, but is rather, part of the shifts of the physical realm.

After this break, the sense of a pause in the landscape, though, seems to suggest the temporary “pause” of winter rather than an eternally frozen moment. Again we have a moment like in “Returned to Yaak Cabin,” where the landscape is both still and active. Here we have:

A hundred mountains and not one bird,
A thousand paths and no sign:
Winter along the James River:

    a shawl of bare trees

Damasks the far bank, a boat
Knocks at its mooring post.

    No one comes forth. Nothing steps

Into the underbrush or rises out of the frame.

No wind, no shudder:

    water and sky, water and sky. (31-40)

The series of images here is haunting. The poem is suddenly in the moment of winter or symbolic death. This is no longer the “transitional showdown” of November or the “afterpiece” that seems comical. The only movement is an empty boat knocking a post. The scene has become a tableau. It is no longer the extreme drama of November, but a moment that leaves the speaker feeling alone—as “No one comes forth,” and there is “No wind, no shudder.”
A sense of resigned sadness infuses the following lines. Lines 41-42 state, “The four seasons are unforgiving, no news, no news” (229). The speaker here recognizes the bewilderment of the speaker of Wright’s later poems, such as “China Traces.” The seasons are unforgiving, and this is “no news, no news.” In other words, the shift from fall to winter is predictably a letdown, where no transcendent drama, which seems on the verge of happening, actually appears. There is no real invisible showdown here; the seasons have done what there are supposed to do—shift in cycles. Yet the predictability is a form of comfort on its own, even when it feels temporarily bare and empty in winter. It seems significant that Wright should make this a line of iambic dimeter—the four syllables, alliterative and repetitive—are like the seasons themselves, predictable and, in their attachment of a sort of dismissive sentiment about the lack of freshness to this insight, unforgiving as well. The speaker says, “A small reward, but I accept it. For over half a century I’ve waited in vain” (43-44). If the seasons are predictable, one can imagine the return of spring, and thereby assume the “resurrection” of life in spring. The season of winter may be unforgiving in that it is a harbinger of mortality, but it also in its recurrence represents the possibility of “rebirth” in spring. Spring is suggested in poem in a few places, from the “raw rood of the power line,” suggesting the Easter holiday, to the “ash” that appears at the end of the poem twice, conjuring the start of the spring Lenten period on Ash Wednesday.

As the poem wraps up, movement returns and the speaker seems to shake off the pause of haunting, existential sadness. Again, he personifies the landscape’s elements, and has an unidentified speaker quoted in italics:

Wind and cloud, sunset and dusk--
they all know where to go.

*You can’t escape the attention of what you can’t see.* (45-47)

When text was italicized in the first stanza, it was clear that it was Expiation speaking from the wings, but here it is less clear who the voice is. We seem to have a disembodied voice of wisdom, something like Pythagoras’ from earlier on as well. Even though the speaker has paused to notice the deadness of the landscape, the disembodied voice seems to say that the speaker still is not entirely alone or without the attention of an invisible force. Hope is revived, and the poem ends with an image of a denouement that realizes the drama it has been poised to enact throughout.

The landscape in “Local Journal” is a vital landscape that seems poised on a moment of transcendence. As Costello wrote in her “Via Negativa” essay, “We have a language of the transcendental without a narrative of transcendence” (334). The seasons become the vehicles of transcendence. They do not, however, present a clear picture of what that transcendence is. The poem ends:

December’s a denouement,

    short steps to the solstice.

Last sun against the mauve hills,

Winter branches smolder, burst into flames, then die out.

At one glance, autumn is gone.

Brake lights from a stalled car shine like a dog’s eyes through the trees.

Heaven and earth are darkened to fine ash.

    To fine ash and white coal. (48-55)
We have the theatrical conceit revived here in the language of “denouement” as the landscape jumps back to life. “Winter branches smolder, burst into flame, then die out” suggesting a finale that is grand, warm, and colorful before coming to complete extinction. The haunting scene presented earlier in the poem is washed away by the images of flame and ash, again, often associated with Christian vernal images, specifically the flame of the Pentecost and Ash Wednesday. The transience of seasons is stated directly: “At one glance, autumn is gone” (52). Spiegelman adds a layer to this, saying “Just as the things of this world are transient, our words are equally ephemeral” (Spiegelman 9). In some moments of some poems, such as “China Traces” and “Returned from Yaak Cabin,” Wright acknowledges the futile effort of his words, but he also continues to write and shape words. Words are like the landscapes for Wright; nature and poems are both hanging precariously on the edge of transcendence, and as in “Local Journal” sometimes the moments of transcendence appear. Both nature and poetry are uncertain, but they both persist. Moffett says that some critical responses to Wright have lamented his lack of certainty, citing Joel Brouwer’s comment the “sometimes it seems like Wright’s project is to find ever more convincing ways to tell us he doesn’t have anything to tell us” (qtd. in Moffett 68), but Moffett contends that Wright’s “contentment with uncertainty” (69), indicates his separation from the seriousness of earlier 20th century poets, most specifically, Wright’s self-acknowledged mentor, Ezra Pound. To use Wright’s own words: “All of my poems seem to be an ongoing argument with myself about the unlikelihood of salvation” (Halflife 37). While seasonal landscape symbols may seem a dull and predictable business, Charles Wright complicates the mundaneness with
dissonance and fractures. The richness of Wright’s seasonal pastorals is owed to their predictable unpredictability.

Chapter 2: Autumn, the Season of Doubt

Autumn is the season that most clearly seems to reflect Charles Wright’s sense of seasonal mystery. There is certainly no dearth of poems set in autumn in his catalogue, yet these poems never comfortably adhere to the easy, conventional symbolism of autumn representing imminent death. As in “Local Journal,” two pairs of poems in particular, “Indian Summer,” “Indian Summer II” and “October” and “October II,” which are spread across the course of Wright’s career, complicate the autumnal landscapes of poetic tradition. Wright commonly echoes the imagery and ideas of his poetic godmother, Emily Dickinson; in fact, he seems to conjure her at every turn. As mentioned, he is deeply concerned with the metaphysical qualities of light that Dickinson attempted to capture, but the connections between their autumnal poems run deeper than a fascination with light.

Emily Dickinson depicts autumn as a season in which the transition of color and landscape often reflects a desire for spiritual transformation or transcendence. Both Dickinson and Wright find the feeling of impending mortality in the advent of autumn as a moment of existential uncertainty that evokes a desire to believe in an afterlife. On the edge of a season heralding the temporary “death” of nature, both poets use bursts of deceptive summer-like warmth, as well as the Christian association of red hues with mortality to represent the human desire for a life after the short human “season.” In the
face of bold earthly change, both Dickinson and Wright wrestle with the undefined metaphysical world, where both hope that change does not signify the extinction of the self. In his article "Delight Deterred by Retrospect," Ernest Sandeen addresses Dickinson’s "Late Summer Poems," codifying her tendencies toward seasonal emotions. His insights can apply to Wright’s poems as well:

Literally and figuratively, winter is the realm of antibeing, opposed to the summer in every way, bringing death instead of life, stasis and paralysis instead of movement, monochromatic dullness instead of color, depression of spirit instead of "ecstasy"...In her early-autumn poems the tipsy bacchanal of summer abruptly encounters the grim fact of impending winter. Consequently, as in the poems of spring, an air of religious awe and prophetic mystery is evoked although the mystery here is a darker one. (485)

While these seasonal associations may seem initially banal, the poems often treat the visible world as a shroud or microcosmic drama upon which the mysteries of the metaphysical world are painted. Dickinson and Wright’s patient questioning of Christian symbolism complicate the obvious seasonal associations, infusing the autumnal awareness of mortality with a struggle to believe that "spring," or another life will actually return. Wright, like Dickinson, uses seasonal skepticism as a doorway to metapoetic meditation as well. Following Dickinson’s lead, Wright makes direct references to words and language in these poems. Wright’s words, like his landscapes, are versatile. Just as the landscape’s shifting elements suggest an uncertainty in the metaphysical realm, so do the shifting meanings of words suggest the same uncertainty.
Both Wright and Dickinson write a series of poems set in the uncanny return of warmth in autumn months, or “Indian Summer.” Wright’s “Indian Summer,” an early poem from the collection *Country Music* seems an homage to Dickinson’s poem 130, “These are the days when Birds come back.” Structurally speaking, both poems have six stanzas, though Dickinson’s stanzas fit neatly into triplets, and Wright’s stanzas vary between single lines and triplets. Both poems are short and have line breaks at the end of natural sentences, which belies the discomfort of the subject matter. Like the fraudulent return of warmth during autumn, there is a mismatched neatness to the formal elements of these poems. Both poems were written early in the poets’ prolific careers, and are nearly devoid of the breaks and pauses that characterize the later work of both.

Dickinson’s “These are the days when Birds come back,” addresses the deception of nature in autumn, calling it a “fraud,” (7) and “mistake,” (6) all the while associating it with deeply revered Christian images and rituals, particularly the Last Supper of Christ with his apostles. The first two stanzas pose the false start of summer again, creating a feeling of warmth and nostalgia for the lost season: “These are the days when Birds come back—” (1) and “These are the days when skies resume/The old—old sophistries of June--/a blue and gold mistake” (4-6). The speaker feels deceived or cheated by nature, and in the third stanza begins to invoke the notions of faith and “belief,” (9) which seem uncertain due to the introduction of nature’s deception early in the poem. As the fraudulent return of summer “almost...induces belief” (9) that warmth is revived, the mention of Christian ritual that follows seems to likewise almost induce belief in a metaphysical world that has been codified and made less obscure by the Christian institution. While the speaker finds warmth and comfort in the second false start of
summer, she likewise finds comfort in the ritual and codification of faith. However, because the speaker feels she cannot trust nature to speak accurately to her, it becomes a reflection of her shaky belief in a metaphysical world. The speaker conjures Christian ritual and imagery as a means of questioning the belief in God.

The second half of poem 130 conflates Christian ritual with the deception of nature. The last three stanzas directly compare the brief revival of summer to the religious commemoration of the Last Supper (Sandeen 489). What Dickinson refers to as the “Sacrament of summer days” (13) and “Last Communion in the Haze” (14) is the deceptive veil that nature is able to create, the fake return of summer. Likewise, the speaker finds the ritual of memorializing the final meeting of Christ with his disciples a deceptive means of understanding the metaphysical world. When she refers to “consecrated bread” (17) and “immortal wine” (18) there is a desire to understand the metaphysical world through symbolism, but, there is also the feeling that these “sacred emblems” (16) cannot adequately convey the metaphysical world that the speaker seeks to understand. Because the speaker does not trust the symbols that nature presents, such as the return of birds, bees and warmth, she feels she may not be able to trust the symbols of metaphysics. The phrase “immortal wine” particularly indicates the desire for life after death. The speaker wants to believe in the fraud of the “Indian summer” and “sacred emblems” because of an existential fear, but finds herself unable to fully trust symbols she sees. While wine represents the blood of the immortal Christ, the speaker recognizes that her own blood is in fact mortal, and the change of the season, masked as it may be by a brief revival of warmth, signals the passage of time and inevitability of her own death. The Last Supper imagery is, like Wright’s conflation of typical spring and
autumn imagery, in poems like “Local Journal” seemingly out of place. One might expect an image of the original Communion to appear in a setting near the Easter holiday in spring, but Dickinson bucks convention and places her natural Communion in the deceptively warm autumn months, where there is a rebirth of warmth.

Wright’s “Indian Summer” echoes the imagery and ideas of “These are the days when Birds come back.” It directly uses the like images of bees, leaves and wind as well as lamenting the way a burst of warmth in autumn makes the speakers aware of their mortality. Nancy Mayer, in her essay "The Back Story: The Christian Narrative & Modernism in Emily Dickinson’s Poems," explains Wright’s uncertainty in terms of carrying on Dickinson’s legacy of skepticism. She writes, “Charles Wright is one living poet who shares Dickinson’s uneasy assumption that transcendence--the possibility of transcending the limits of embodiment and particularity--is an idea to be reckoned with--although, like Dickinson, he retains a wary agnosticism” (3). “Indian Summer,” while a compact poem, has all the deep resonations of Dickinson’s uncertainty about the other world through the lens of the physical world.

The first two lines of “Indian Summer” read, “The plains drift on through the deep daylight./I watch the snow bees sent mad by the sun.” Like the beginning of “These are the days when Birds come back” where the birds “take a backward look” (3), creatures of warm weather are personified and disturbed by the unnatural patterns of nature. Both poems use three stressed syllables, at the end of the first lines, which may mirror the effect of the beating sun or perhaps wings of the birds, but in any case, generate musical power and momentum at the beginning of poems about nature’s false flash of summer. On the surface, “Indian Summer” seems to begin with a pleasant,
pastoral setting of plains in sunlight, but beyond the driving metrical opening, there are a
variety of clues that the season’s warmth isn’t right. The plains that “drift” may initially
evoke the slow-moving pace of a warm, relaxed summer, but the very notion of plains
drifting seems unnatural. The landscape is unmoored; the earth is drifting and proves
unsettling for the speaker. Likewise, the mad bees are a signal, like Dickinson’s
backward glancing birds, that there is a break in the natural order of things—a break
which disavows the warmth’s comfort.

Through the next several stanzas of both “Indian Summer” and “These are the
days when Birds come back,” the wind ruffles leaves, hinting at the invisible force that
refuses to make itself known. While Dickinson’s poem personifies with timidity, “softly
through the altered air/ Hurries a timid leaf” (11-12), Wright imbues the trees and wind
with corporeal characteristics more boldly. Lines 4-6 give swinging limbs, stretching
necks, and blowing hair to the landscape:

The limbs of the hickory trees swing loose in the noontide,

Feathery, stretching their necks.

The wind blows through its own hair forever. (4-6)

There is a certain luxuriating sense to the landscape, in spite of the mad bees and
unmoored plains, but again, a closer look warrants a sense of unease. Here, we have a
hickory tree, a deciduous tree (that ever-present symbol of autumn’s transformative
power) that has an eerie sense of being both frozen and active. The trees are both
swinging loose and lazily stretching, but the real indication of a desire to freeze this
pleasant but unnatural moment comes with the wind blowing “through its own hair
forever.” The “immortal” life Dickinson mentions is present in Wright’s poem with the word “forever” describing the wind.

Again calling on Pankey’s idea that “so many of Wright’s poems, [are] at once static and headlong,” the poem dives directly into the mysteries of metaphysics (147). The place where “Indian Summer” attaches more overtly to this in-betweenness is around lines 6-8, which read, “If something is due me still--Firedogs, ashes, the soap of another life--/ I give it back.” Dickinson is here again, in the dashes, and it seems that this break in the poem indicates a shift toward trying to understand the metaphysical realm. It is the only place in the poem where dashes appear, and because of that is a line set apart entirely. The vagueness of “something” is seemingly amended in the following line with suggestions (“Firedogs, ashes, the soap of another life”), but its vagueness attests to the continued mystery of the other realm. Likewise, “still” at the end of the line contextually seems to mean “yet,” but “still” can also mean “motionless,” suggesting that in-betweenness again and contrasting the drifting plains, swaying trees and blowing wind.

The line between the dashes suggest items that are also ambiguous and evocative of metaphysics and possibly even Christian tradition. “Firedogs” which help feed a flame and turn physical items to ash and “ashes,” the first two of the suggestions, are related and show the mutability of even some seemingly stable physical objects, such as wood. As mentioned, fire and ash are certainly rich symbols in the Roman Catholic traditions of Ash Wednesday and associating the Holy Spirit with a flame. The third item in the trinity of what is “due me” is “soap of another life.” Soap, which seems a simple physical symbol of cleanliness (with possible religious connotations of purity) is complicated with the phrase “of another life.” Perhaps what the phrase suggests is that there is another,
metaphysical life that would wash this world of uncertainty or sin if it could be achieved, but it is “due me still.” Like soap, fire can be cleansing or purifying, so it seems that this suggests that whatever the “something” that is still due is, it has something to do with purification.

The last two lines read “I give it back. And this hive/ Of shelved combs, my wax in its little box” (8-9). The “something” that the speaker hands back, a something having to do with purification, is wrapped in layers of uncertainty, but is followed up by the most concrete and detailed image of the poem. The speaker gives back the “something,” rejects what is “due,” and then suggests he is also giving back a bee-hive. The hive is the intricate work of the bees that appears earlier in the poem, and the wax in the shelved combs is the product of great labor. The bees who are sent “mad” earlier in the poem by the unseasonable warmth seem a possible parallel to the poet. While the bees produce wax in their frantic work in the sunlight, the poet produces a poem, which like the “shelved combs” of a hive has layers and intricacies, which, when patiently extracted yield something malleable—in the case of the hive, wax, in the case of the poem, an idea about another world. The “little box” that closes the last line could be read as analogous to the shape of the poem itself. Perhaps too, the expression “to wax poetic” is in someway related to the work the poet does in creating a product just as the bees do. Another interesting element of this is that Wright uses wax, rather than honey, which is perhaps the more conventionally and widely harvested product of beehives. The qualities and uses of wax and honey are quite different. Wax is used to construct the hive itself, whereas honey is the food stored inside the hive. By using wax rather than honey, Wright privileges wax, the product used to store the honey, more than the honey itself. Assuming
the wax is analogous in some way to the form of the poem, what this suggests then is that the form is as or even more important than the honey, or the sweetness contained by the form. Beyond this, wax is malleable and shifts shape like the other unreliable elements of nature. Like "Returned to Yaak Cabin," "Indian Summer" has bees, traces of Dickinson and perhaps most significantly, a seasonal moment of in-betweenness, poised at the edge of another realm.

Another Dickinson poem conjures bees and conflates Christian ritual with seasonal imagery. An earlier Dickinson poem, number 18, "The Gentian weaves her fringes" according to Sandeen very literally equates the death of summer to the death of a human being, with a series of Christian burial rites performed by nature (487). It also shows nature generating products—weaving "fringes"—and bees in a human-like poses. In this poem creatures of nature kneel in prayer, process, and recite a pseudo-Sign of the Cross, "In the name of the Bee--/and of the Butterfly--/And of the Breeze—Amen" (16-18). This poem too is set in autumn, when the "Maple’s loom is red" (2) and blossoms depart. The invocation of Christian ritual here serves to literally mourn mortality after a "brief, but patient illness," likely the first signs of colder weather on the cusp of fall. This conflation of mortality, autumn, and Christian ritual again serves to question the human set of beliefs about a spiritual realm. Dickinson’s use of the color red also hints at the association of a symbol of mortality—blood—with the transformation of leaves in autumn.

Dickinson’s notions of mortality and immortality emerge from her Christian belief. While Dickinson herself may have been the product of a society that predominantly accepted Christian constructs of an afterlife, Dickinson’s poems wrestle
earnestly with these prescribed notions, and her autumn poems often, as illustrated in
"These are the days when Birds come back" and "The Gentian weaves her fringes,"
examine the possibility that the widely accepted Christian symbolism, such as burial
rituals and Communion ceremony, cannot be trusted or believed. As Nancy Mayer
proposes in "The Back Story: The Christian Narrative & Modernism in Emily
Dickinson's Poems," "[f]or Dickinson, metaphysical engagement, which in her case is
serious and deep, is steeped in a widely shared Christian (and specifically American
Protestant) narrative of the resurrections of souls" (1). Dickinson's lens was that of a
world where immortality is taken for granted. Mayer continues:

Dickinson engages tirelessly with "Immortality," the possibility, commonly
accepted not just by her family and neighbors but by most intellectuals of her day,
that there is another always-pending form of human life that will follow and
transform the trajectory of embodied lives that end in death. (1)

The idea that Dickinson challenged these beliefs, which on the surface may have seemed
blasphemous to her contemporaries, is in actuality a truer expression of her struggle to
accept faith. Dickinson's autumn motif searches for a symbol of eternal life, and finds
reason for doubt, yet continues to embrace and engage with the narrative of Christian
resurrection. This seems to illustrate a deep-seated belief in the afterlife, ruffled briefly
by the transformation of fall and its undeniable reminders of human mortality. Mayer
explains Dickinson's existential struggle by arguing that "[t]he back story that allows
Christians a reprieve from the given teleology of human lives allows Dickinson to
acknowledge our common inability to really grasp the fact of our own mortality" (2).
Because Dickinson presents the Christian symbolism and ritual, she not only
demonstrates a serious desire for faith, but furthermore, an acceptance that Christianity cannot entirely eliminate the human fear and doubt about the existence of life after death.

Wright, like Dickinson, was raised in a way that caused him to grapple with the institutions and rituals of Christianity. While Dickinson lived among the faithful in 19th century Amherst, Massachusetts, Wright admits of his religious formation: “I was formed at the catechism in Kingsport, the evangelical looniness at Sky Valley Community in North Carolina, and by the country songs and hymns, I guess, I kept hearing on the radio back in Tennessee. It was altered by the very same things that formed it” (Half Life 109).

In other words, Wright was steeped in Christian culture as well, and questioned it, he says, because he was so steeped in it. Wright’s “Indian Summer II” more overtly conjures the biblical narratives that Dickinson uses so freely in poems like “The Gentian weaves her fringes.” “Indian Summer II” also echoes this poem in its vivid color imagery and its personified elements of the landscape.

“Indian Summer II,” the follow up to the early poem, appears in the much later collection Negative Blue. Mingling with existentially tinged autumnal imagery, Christian images saturate the poem. The poem begins, “As leaves fall from the trees, the body falls from the soul.” The metaphysical realm is present from the outset, and immediately equates death--“the body falls from the soul”--with the standard autumnal image of leaves falling. It continues:

As memory signs transcendence, scales fall from the heart.

As sunlight winds back on its dark spool,

November’s a burn and ache.
In these lines, the vehicle of memory is a mystic force that, like death, allows for a certain freedom. The “scales” that “fall from the heart” can be read in a few different ways. Physically speaking, if a heart has scales, is resembles a fish. Fish, of course, are common symbols in the New Testament, most prominently where Christ is referred to as a fisherman of souls. On fish, scales are form of protection, and here, the falling of scales could mean a heart that is made vulnerable or open to the transcendence of memory.

Another place scales show up are in Acts 9:18, where Saul is converted, and “something like scales” fall from his eyes. One could also read scales meaning a device for measuring, so that when “scales fall from the heart” it means that the heart loses its ability to gauge the weight of something burdensome or troubling. In autumn then, in either reading, memory helps unburden hearts. Perhaps what this means then is that memory of warmth, and symbolically youth, helps soothe the feeling of impending death that the falling leaves could suggest.

The metaphor of sunlight winding back on its dark spool has the effect of privileging light over darkness. Darkness is not encroaching on the scene, but rather, light is winding back so that darkness is simply the absence of light rather than a presence itself. The gap before the next line is the sort of presence-suggesting-absence of “China Traces.” A long white space precedes “November’s a bum and ache,” which gives pause, and seems to suggest the winding back light as much as the phrase itself does. There is something both lovely and unsettling about November being a “bum and ache.” Certainly burns and aches are typically unpleasant feelings, but here, associated with memory, there seems to be the burn and ache of a nostalgic longing, a longing that is not altogether unpleasant because of the way memory is associated with an unburdened heart in the
previous lines. There is also the playfulness in the fact that “burn” and “ache” are often paired with heart, locating the pain in the body’s conventional emotional center.

The next stanza situates the poem in “late evening” (5), on a Sunday (7). This triplet contains a series of fragments: “Residual blood in the oak’s veins./ Sunday. Recycling tubs like flower bins at the curb.” Here we find the sanguine red common to both Dickinson and Wright. Again, a tree in fall has been anthropomorphized with blood and veins, corporeal elements that conjure mortality and the fragility of an expiring or expired life. The blood here is only “Residual” and therefore has been run out. Again, we have a deciduous tree, the oak heralding the end of symbolic youth and the decline towards death. Yet, the poem is called “Indian Summer II”; there is a sense that even though autumn may suggest death, memory serves to provide some youthful warmth, as the season’s weather still does. In other words, nature is not yet dead, and neither is the speaker nor his memories. But, again, the poem’s implications of hope are not so neatly packaged. The very fragmentary nature of these lines is a suggestion of uncertainty. Flickering images do not make a perfectly comfortable scene, once again suggesting a sense of doubt. Sunday is, of course, the Christian Sabbath and therefore infuses the poem further with a sense of connection to the spiritual realm, but “Sunday” is made a sentence on its own. It stands apart from the rest of its line and seems an incomplete thought. Similarly, recycling tubs suggests some sense of environmental regeneration, but they’re juxtaposed in the unexpected simile to “flower bins.” Imagining aluminum cans like flowers shows again how disjointed the scene seems at its core. Man-made objects on a cement curb foul up a communion with nature and serve as anchors to a world that can seem transcendent in its natural state, but reeks of common-worldliness between
glass, plastic, aluminum and cement. These are objects that have been made to subvert the transience of the natural world and outlast human lifespans.

The discomfort with the physical world suggested by these lines is followed up by three lines that begin “Elsewhere.” The first suggests a horrific death—“Elsewhere, buried up to her armpits,/ someone is being stoned to death” (8-9). Mortality is no vague suggestion here, and the poem confronts the reality of gruesome crimes human beings commit against one another, quite possibly in the name of religious belief, which also serves to question institutionalized spirituality. The poem goes on, “Elsewhere, transcendence searches for us” (10) and “The heavenly way has been lost,/ no use to look at the sky” (12-13). Here, the poem seems faithless in terms of finding the goodness or way to heaven for humanity. There is a bereft pause mourning the loss of transcendence in a world rife with trash and concrete as well as atrocities such as a stoning. Like Wright’s other poems, though, “Indian Summer II” vacillates in its commitment to any set of beliefs. The next line reinvigorates a belief in the natural world’s ability to reveal something of the metaphysical realm.

Line 14 begins with another pregnant “Still”; “Still” it reads, “the stars, autumnal stars, start to flash and transverbérate.” Even in a world of trash and murder, a world where the trees seem to conjure a bloody mortality, the stars provide reassurance. Flashing, transverberating stars are the heavenly bodies that show the way to spiritual transcendence. The next line reprises the phrase from the first line “The body falls from the soul” and gives the soul the power to move and quiet the disquieting aspects of everyday life. It reads, “The body falls from the soul, and the soul takes off,/ a wandering, moral drug” (15-16). The metaphysical realm, then, does provide a way for
souls and is even a “moral drug,” suggesting that belief in its existence can bring
euphoria or an absence of pain. The body falls from the soul, as though the body
burdened the soul, like the “scales fall[ing] from the heart” in line 2. The soul “takes off”
without its corporeal burden, and even becomes something moral and right. Yet there are
elements of the phrase “a wandering, moral drug” that do not entirely engender
confidence. The fact that the the soul is “wandering” suggests that it is lost. Furthermore,
even though it is a “moral drug,” the soul is still something then that creates an altered
reality or dulls reality in some way.

The last several stanzas of “Indian Summer II” resolve that there are, in fact, two
concurrent realities. “This is an end without a story,” reads line 17, and “This is a little
bracelet of flame around your wrist” (18), and “This is the serpent in the Garden,/her
yellow hair, her yellow hair (19-20). Once again we have a triplet with anaphora. All
three of these things would otherwise seem complete without the bothersome caveat of
some quality of its existence. An “end without a story” suggests something occurring
with no explanatory preceding events to clarify--it is an answer without a question. So
while it is an end, there is nothing complete about it. It also plays with a notion that
seems more familiar, “a story without an end,” or an eternal story--but this is the opposite
of that. The end is reached without the steps of beginning and middle, suggesting
something that exists without logic, just as a the metaphysical realm might. Similarly, a
“little bracelet of flame around your wrist” is something that seems bothersome in that it
should be a complete circle, but a complete circle of something that shifts and is not
solid, as well as being painful. The third part of this trinity in its allusion to Genesis
suggests how the landscape is never an idyllic Eden, because there will always be the
interposing serpent of doubt in faith. Edenic, pastoral scenes, in other words, are always shattered by Original Sin. The curious detail of the echoing, “her yellow hair, her yellow hair” comes after both a line break and a long white gap. Is the “her,” Eve? Perhaps the repeated “her yellow hair” speaks to the inability to escape Original Sin. The repetition is a way of echoing the way Original Sin is the first of a series of human sins. The color yellow is an autumnal hue, in any case, and provides another aesthetically vague allusion that complicates the autumnal landscape.

The poem ends by conjuring a made-up saying by St. Augustine. The significance of presenting an idea through the guise of an invented aphorism, is in pointing out how much faith human beings put in the words of those they respect. Here, Wright is lending importance to the act of writing itself, and once again using words to question the power of words. The last four lines read:

We live in two landscapes, as Augustine might have said,

One that’s eternal and divine,

and one that’s just the backyard,

Dead leaves and dead grass in November, purple in spring.

Wright is positing a spiritual reality by conjuring a saint, albeit through an invented thought of that saint. These lines simultaneously accept that the world is both the transient cyclical symbols of seasons--dead leaves and bright flowers of spring--and a transverberating, eternal divine world. This poem says a backyard is, in some respects, just a backyard and not a language to read the metaphysical realm, but then again, is also “eternal and divine.” As Wright once said in an interview with Thomas Gardner, “If you
don't have vision, you ain't got nothing. If your back yard is just your back yard, you may as well crack another Budweiser" (*A Door Ajar* 99). So while the poem may at moments suggest that the landscape does not elucidate the metaphysical realm, it does not confidently assert this. Wright's "Indian Summer" poems, like Dickinson's, persistently play with skepticism, but seem to err on the side of belief, perhaps because facing the mortality that fall suggests without the possibility of an afterlife is too terrifying. Both Dickinson and Wright seems to favor the possibility of belief, as in Pascal's wager, because there is perhaps nothing to lose by believing in something that doesn't exist, but there is plenty to lose by not believing in what does.

Wright's two "October" poems also use autumnal landscapes to comment on the invisible realm. As Gardner offers, "Wright's back yard, as numerous commentators have noted, is shot through with both the fleeting, born-away traces of another world offered by light, shadow, and seasonal change" (73). Wright finds the season of autumn in "October" a troubling and immediate reminder of mortality. His poem "October" illustrates a clear desire to engage with and embrace Christian narrative and symbolism, in order to find comfort when the landscape shows harbingers of winter or "death." "October" begins with the image of leaves falling from the speaker's fingers, scattered cornflowers (like "smoke stars" 3), and "leaves in a drift" (4). As in many of his poems, these autumnal images have a quality of evanescence. The scattering and dispersal of the leaves evokes an association the fleeting, intangible nature of life and death. The speaker finds himself "Under the slow clouds/ and the nine steps to heaven" (5-6). Here the allusion to heaven begins the speaker's fantasy of Christ-like like transformation. While watching the changing light, clouds, and leaves, the speaker imagines his own change, or
transfiguration, into a celestial being, climbing to heaven. This allusion to the Christ narrative, specifically the story of the transfiguration, reveals a desire to believe in the Christian notion of an afterlife. While the speaker gives the Christian narrative enough stock to become the subject of the poem with a sense of reverent awe, he makes himself the subject of the transfiguration—in doing so, the speaker simultaneously questions and shows veneration for Christianity, as Wright so often does. By transfiguring the self, or becoming divine, and therefore immortal, the speaker is able to confront the reminders of mortality that autumn brings without total despair.

Wright depicts the light “falling in great sheets through the trees,/ Sheets almost tangible” (7-8), which sets up the continued questioning of the difference between concrete and abstract. The speaker of the poem seems to have vision of the metaphysical world, which, like in Dickinson’s poems, is illuminated by observation of nature. Here, again, we have something like Dickinson’s slant of light, which is “almost tangible.” The light’s near physicality, like Wright’s near belief, gives it the otherworldly quality that begins a shift in the poem. The next line shifts the poem into the fantasy of transfiguration: “The transfiguration will start like this, I think,/breathless” (9-10). The speaker sees the change in light and season as the ultimate symbol of his eventually becoming divine, illustrating a clear desire to believe Christian symbolism. In witnessing the “transfiguration” of light and leaves, the speaker becomes aware of his mortality, and instead of approaching the existential fear with a sense of doubt, he embraces the idea that this is simply the symbol of his eventual divine inheritance in the metaphysical realm. Wright’s use of the word “breathless,” relegated to a line of its own gives pause. Breath is what keeps humans alive, and here the speaker stands momentarily or
figuratively without breath, yet is still able to live. Like the light that the speaker finds “almost tangible” breath is a part of the physical world, yet is not something that can be captured or easily observed. Again, Wright is playing with the boundaries of the physical and metaphysical worlds, making the reader question where the line between abstract and concrete lies. Furthermore, this use of breath can be a moment of metapoetry, where “breathless” means unable to write a line that matches the gravity of the situation.

As the speaker stands breathlessly observing the light and anticipating transfiguration, he catalogs ambiguous and possibly violent images, which serve to suggest the mortal nature of the speaker, and his fragile human state prior to transfiguration. Line 11 reads, “Quick blade through the trees,” which can refer to several things. The speaker might be saying that the light, which will serve as an indication of his divinity in the transfiguration is a quick blade. Or he may refer to the natural light that falls in great sheets as a blade. Another possibility is that he himself is moving like a quick blade, ascending the “nine steps to heaven.” The lack of definite answers gives the already slippery subject matter an element of further mystery. What is clear, however, is that the image of a “blade” calls to mind violence, which is echoed in the next line where, “Something with red colors [is] falling away from my hands” (12). Again it is unclear what the “something with red colors” is. The “something” may be the leaves that fell from the speaker’s fingers in the first line, but by using the word “something,” Wright’s deliberate ambiguity presents the probability that he refers to something else as well, namely, blood, or light which resembles blood. The previous line’s introduction of a “blade” supports this reading, and in line 15 the speaker mentions blood, himself becoming “a blood-knot of light.” In the red hues of October the speaker
cannot help but become aware of his mortality, seeing it as something that is fragile and may drain away, or slip from his fingers. To combat this existential fear, the speaker confidently presents a vision of a metaphysical realm where the body is unimportant and the spilling of blood is the beginning of transformation into a greater state.

In the next line, unlike the "Indian Summer" poems, Wright's vision of autumn here is marked by the "air beginning to go cold..." (13). While the "Indian Summer" poems focus on the mildness of autumn, and its ability to deceive, "October" notes the coldness. The duality of autumn, where days can be as warm as summer, or alternatively biting cold, bears the same feeling of unpredictability and uncertainty that the speakers in Dickinson's and Wright's poems have regarding the duality of life; that is, both poets construct worlds where the natural world stands in contrast to the invisible metaphysical world, but also appears as a doorway to understanding it. In "October" it is the air becoming colder that marks the speaker's entrance into the metaphysical realm.

Transfiguration means death in this poem, as when the air grows cold, the speaker begins an ascent into heaven as a "blood-knot of light" rising from a "tired body" (15). The mortal coil here seems an inadequate and worn-out shell, while the real self, the "blood-knot of light" is radiant and "[r]eady to take the darkness in" (16). One has to wonder to what the "darkness" refers. Perhaps the speaker feels that mortality is the "darkness" and that human beings do not find "light" until after death, i.e. transfiguration. It could also refer to the fear of what comes after life, finally illuminated by the transfiguration. Whatever the "darkness" may be, the speaker makes it clear that his metaphysical state will consume darkness and he will be literally illuminated.
Like in others of Wright's poems, the final stanza of "October" functions to undo some of the confidence of the previous vision of transfiguration. Beginning with the simple word "Or" Wright subverts his own beautiful fantasy of becoming a blood-knot of light, and presents another possibility of what the transfiguration may be like. This stanza works to show the continued sense of mystery, by presenting an alternative, yet it never questions the fact that the speaker will actually be transfigured. The speaker seems to take it for granted that he will reach a transcendent state, yet, is unsure of the details, and so looks to nature to find symbols and patterns. Wright presents another possibility for the transfiguration which is, "for the wind to come/ And carry me bone by bone, through the sky" (17-18). While this fragmentation of self is different than the image of becoming a knot of light, it, like the image of light, calls upon one of the natural world's intangible elements—wind—to carry the speaker to the metaphysical realm. It is significant that the speaker mentions bones; again he uses the natural symbols of what hold humans together, blood and bones to show a connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds. The final two lines of the poem echo Emily Dickinson's invocation of "sacred emblems" from "These are the days when Birds come back." What Dickinson calls "consecrated bread" and "immortal wine" Wright names a "wafer burn on my tongue" (19) and "wine deep forgetfulness" (20). Because the symbols of the sacrament of Communion represent the blood and body of Christ, Wright's comparison seems apt coming on the heels of his mention of blood and bones. The Christian symbols provide some comfort in the face of inevitable death, and therefore become a way to withstand the observation of changing seasons. Wright's speaker in "October" chooses to see the changes that autumn presents as a means of imagining his own transformation into an
afterlife where there is a guaranteed continuation of the self, however that may manifest itself.

“October II,” from the collection *Negative Blue*, is a followup poem, also infused with Christian imagery and uncertainty. “October II” plays openly with absences and furthermore, directly addresses metapoetics in an autumnal setting. It begins with two lines broken by Wright’s characteristic fragments and gaps:

October in mission creep,

    autumnal reprise and stand down.

This seems like it should be one line, and it seems like it should be a complete sentence, but it is neither of those complete things. There is a long blank space breaking the sentence fragment in two. Instead of “October is in mission creep” the line reads “October in mission creep,” which suggests the first of many absences in the poem.

“Mission creep,” a noun, according to Merriam-Webster, is “the gradual broadening of the original objectives of a mission or organization.” While “creep” on its own could be the not-quite-logical verb in this sentence, it is not. Wright’s use of “mission creep” to refer to October adds to the sense of absence by being part of a sentence fragment, but also lends the month a certain sentience and power. In order for October to have “mission creep,” it must have an objective that has outgrown itself. Attached to the phrase “mission creep,” October is a month that seems to overstep its bounds, attempting something that it did not originally intend to, suggesting strength, specifically military strength, in spite of the absences. Yet, this strength presents itself gradually. The strength of October is not one of oppressive heat or bitter cold, which would be a dramatic way of reminding the speaker of mortality, but rather, October’s strength a strength that “creeps”
or sneaks up on us. Leaves, light, and temperature never stay stable in autumn, and their mission "creeps"—leaves turn yellow to orange to red to brown and fall; the sunset comes earlier and earlier; and one day can seem like summer again, while another it might snow. October is a month of power and mystery with shifting and uncertain realities. The follow-up phrase "autumnal reprise and stand down" is likewise powerful and mysterious. October is the "autumnal reprise" or echo of something, perhaps a life that came before, or perhaps just a reprisal of autumns past, suggesting the order of the natural world. Perhaps the "autumnal reprise" here refers even to the fact that this poem is the aesthetic follow-up to the previous poem titled "October." What exactly is being reprised is another one of the absences. In any case, the reprise allows for autumn to be seen as a break, or "stand down," because it is a familiar and comfortable repetition. "Stand down," is a phrase that suggests a rest available before the onslaught of winter’s harsh weather, or a lull before the "death" of winter.

Line 3 follows with the counterintuitive assertion, "The more reality takes shape, the more it loses intensity--". Because autumn is a season of uncertainty and change, it never really "takes shape." This is the first mention of the word "shape," a word that appears nine times throughout the course of the poem. If, as the line suggests, reality is made dull by becoming concrete or "taking shape," certainly autumn never loses intensity then by constantly shifting, or having "mission creep." But Wright says this by invoking the opposite. He uses the negative to express the positive, yet another way of having absence suggest presence. The next three lines are a list of illusory fragments, "Synaptic uncertainty,/ Electrical surge and the quick lick of the minus sign,/ Tightening of the force field" (4-6). Here, in spite of the previous suggestions that autumn is a slow moving
“creep” or “stand down,” autumn has the potential for an abrupt show of force. In other words, to quote Pankey, it is “at once both static and headlong” (147). Wright literally refers to October as “uncertainty” here, as well as mentioning a “minus sign,” yet again showing how autumn’s uncertainty and instability are the very things that garner its power, and make it a force of the metaphysical realm. The last two lines of this stanza are also play with shape-shifting. Lines 7-8 follow “the force field” tightening, a, force field “[w]herein our forms are shaped and shapes are formed/ wherein we pare ourselves to our attitudes...” suggesting that autumn’s power lies in its ability to shape or change human beings as well as landscapes. The slipperiness of the phrasing here, shapes being formed and forms being shaped, like “creep” from the first line, plays with words that can be both nouns and verbs, in other words, both objects and actions. By showing how the same words can refer to both objects and actions, Wright attests to the power of words to mimic the power of nature’s slippery representations in autumn. Words, in this line, are “at once static and headlong”; words are shapes that shift, and the poem elevates the power of language to the power of nature in doing so. The line also recalls line 3, where “the more reality takes shape, the more it loses its intensity.” Thus, if in autumn, “our shapes are formed and forms are shaped” we must lose intensity, which may explain why “we pare ourselves to attitudes.” If autumn conventionally symbolizes a decline toward death, and we are losing intensity by taking “shape,” we assume that our attitudes, our abstract thoughts and mindsets, mean more than our physical forms which are in decline, and pare ourselves to attitudes, just as the trees pare themselves by shedding leaves. Assuming that the “we” stands in for humanity, what this stanza seems to suggest is that the shifting shapes of autumn act out a drama in which humans can read their own
destiny after death. Mortality, so vividly evoked in autumn, need not be a terrifying moment before absence and death, but rather, a force with which to be reckoned, a motivating moment, or a beautifully spun shock of temporary electric color, hinting at the existence of another realm.

The next stanza begins with a phrase that supports this reading. It begins, “Do not despair,” and then presents an allusion to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*—a play where characters famously despair about the absence of God(ot). This allusion does what so many of Wright’s poems do, i.e., presents two ambiguous possibilities for reality. If the first stanza and first part of line 9 seem to say “Do not despair” about death, then the next lines call this assertion into question. Lines 9-11 posit, “Do not despair—one of the thieves was saved; do not presume--/ one of the thieves was damned,/ Wrote Beckett, quoting St. Augustine.” This set of lines presents the idea that we are just as likely to be damned as saved, but does so through the lens of other writers. Using the Crucifixion narrative, where Christ between two thieves, the image uses the Christ narrative, but through lenses of other writers. Here is Augustine, conjured again, as he is in “Indian Summer II.” Again, though, St. Augustine is not conjured directly through his own words, but through layers of quotation. Whereas in “Indian Summer II”, the speaker says “as Augustine might have said,” here, Augustine’s words are filtered through the late modernist lens of Samuel Beckett. This alone speaks to skepticism, and as Wright himself has said, “All of my poems seem to be an ongoing argument with myself about the unlikelihood of salvation” (*Halflife* 37). The Beckett line comes from a character who waits in vain for the arrival of a character commonly read as God, or Beckett’s playful representation of such a figure, implying the total absence of God. Therefore, the initial
sincere reading of “Do not despair--one of the thieves was saved,” meaning even if one sins, there is a likelihood of salvation, becomes an indictment of the Christian narratives that so often serve to soothe existential anxieties.

The next lines again elevate the power of words, and meta-poetically acknowledge how words can become as powerful in their music as their meaning. Lines 12-14 assert, “It was the shape of the sentence he liked, the double iambic/ pentameter./ It is the shape that matters, he said.” Wright directly refers to the “double iambic pentameter” of the line “Do not despair--one of the thieves was saved; do not presume--/ one of the thieves was damned.” Wright acknowledges the music of Beckett’s lines and even mimics it in this very line, which is itself double iambic pentameter. The neatness of the lines belie the ambiguity of the message, which is that we cannot be sure what comes after life. But the lines also present pairs, in both the two syllable foot of the iamb and the “double” iambic pentameter, as a way to show the duality and ambiguity of reality. The aesthetic concerns of the language of both Beckett and Wright are as important as what the words mean. The shape of the words, or landscape of words, in other words, do as much work to convey meaning as the words’ denotations and connotations. The shape of Wright’s words are in his gaps, his dashes, and especially in “October II” his reprisals and repetitions of what came before. The next three lines playfully echo previous lines and play with shifting shapes of words, again echoing autumn’s shifting shapes:

   * Indeed, shape precludes shapelessness, as God precludes Godlessness.

   Form is the absence of all things. Like sin. Yes, like sin. (15-17)
The lines seem like obvious tautology in some ways. Of course shape precludes shapelessness for any particular item, because if it has a shape, then it cannot be shapeless. However, what of the autumnal shape-shifting symbols, and even the shape-shifting meaning of words throughout the poem? Words can be nouns and verb, objects and actions, meaning one thing as well as another. The symmetry, music and repetition of these lines then become as meaningful as the slippery meanings of words. Shape may preclude shapelessness in some ways, but the poem contradicts this in other ways. These line also present a moment of possible homage to Wallace Stevens' “The Auroras of Autumn,” where Line 10 has “form gulping after formlessness.” Both Wright and Stevens use autumn to play with shape, form and absence.

The poem takes another curious structural turn in this stanza. The idea that “God precludes/ Godlessness,” seems to assert that God exists. The notion of God, in other words, makes it impossible for God to not exist, but this is not actually what the line says. Just because “God precludes/ Godlessness” it does not mean God exists. Just as a shape precludes shapelessness for a particular item, God precludes Godlessness for a single person who believes in that God, but does not preclude “Godlessness” as an idea or reality for other people. In fact, “Godlessness” is given emphasis by being in a line of its own, set apart by more blank spaces. Shape in the poem does not actually seem to “preclude shapelessness” and neither does God seem to actually “preclude Godlessness.”

The last line of this stanza further unhinges the poem from a clear statement about the relationship of the physical realm to the metaphysical realm. Its statement that “[f]orm is the absence of all things. Like sin. Yes, like sin,” directly mentions absences in relationship to form. One could easily read this metapoetically, in that the “form” of a
poem is in its absence of all things, but contains specific things. Or, one can read the line more generally. If there is a form to something, something can’t be “all things” because it is a specific thing. Sin, for instance, is a specific “form” that precludes “all things.” Once again, the shifting of the words, or their lack of definite “shape,” so to speak, seem to grasp at an idea that bridges the physical and metaphysical realms.

The near achievement of explaining that metaphysical realm is certainly in the final stanza, and situates the poem back in autumn. It begins, “It’s the shape beneath the shape that summons us, the juice/ That spreads the rose, the multifoliate spark/ that drops the leaf” (18-19). Perhaps what the speaker refers to here is the Platonic ideal of objects, “the shape beneath the shape,” implying that it is the invisible, abstract ideal realm that causes nature to change, such as when leaves drop in autumn. Again though, there is a hint at meta-poetics, where “multifoliate” can refer not only to plantlife, but “leaves” of books as well. He goes on that it is the “shape beneath the shape,” that “darkens our entranceways,/ The rush that transfigures the maple tree,/ the rush that transubstantiates our lives” (20-22). Here are more lists of changes, of shapelessness referring to shapes. It is the “shape beneath the shape” that is the catalyst for change. Once again Wright uses diction that conjures the Christian narrative. We have a transubstantiation or a change of bread and wine to the flesh and blood of Christ being equated with the transfiguration of the maple tree. Autumn most certainly evokes that ultimate narrative of divine metaphysical being turned to flesh, that is, God made manifest in the body of Christ. The last two lines seem chant-like: “October, the season’s signature and garnishee,/ October, the exponential negative, the plus” (23-24). Here, October stands in as the absolute representative of autumn--its signature and garnishee--and ends with yet another negative
conjuring a positive. As an “exponential negative,” October actually represents a
presence. “October II” is a poem that both wishes for the afterlife as well as questioning
it. It uses all of the uncertain autumnal symbols of his other poems and the Dickinsonian
tradition, but it further makes use of absences as presences and specifically comments on
how language works into this equation.

Both Dickinson and Wright use autumn to signify a belief that the self, like
nature, can transform rather than just cease to exist. By engaging Christian symbolism
and narrative, these two poets both assuage and aggravate the fear that there is no life
after death. In exploring the Christian set of beliefs both poets find an unsettling struggle
to accept such proscribed views, yet both seem to regard Christian imagery with a deep
reverence. As Dickinson writes in poem 1682, “Summer begins to have the look”:
“Conclusion is the course of All/At most to be perennial/And then elude stability/Recalls
to immortality” (13-16). Here, Dickinson expresses the dilemma she and Wright share
in facing autumn. Watching the “death” of summer reminds each that death is inevitable;
however, each also witnesses the fact that life will return in spring. As nature seems to
present contradicting messages, each turns to Christian symbols to find comfort, but in
doing so also finds more questions. While Wright and Dickinson’s autumn poems
express uncertainty, they both also demonstrate fervent desire for faith as well.

Chapter 3: Ars Poetica: Language as the Doorway to the Divine

While Charles Wright’s quasi-pastoral landscapes and autumnal poems often have
echoes of ars poetica, he writes more directly about language in a series of poems he
actually names "Ars Poetica." Like the "Indian Summer" and "October" poems, these are written at different points in his career, yet are bound together by his common subjects of the transcendent power of nature and how language functions to convey that and be similarly transcendent. The "Ars Poetica" poems are more overt in their approach to elevating poetics to the realm of the divine, which is evident in titling them "Ars Poetica." Like his other poems though, these have no resolution about language, but rather, struggle with the failings of language at the same time as they elevate language.

"Ars Poetica" from the collection *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, is full of Wright’s characteristic gaps and white spaces. Several lines stand apart as stanzas of their own, asserting the integrity of the line, and causing contrast through their separation in a sea of white blankness, or silence, if the poem were to be read aloud. In an essay called “Poetics,” H.L. Hix explains, “No ingredient appears more frequently in recent *ars poetica* poems than silence” (72). Hix goes on to cite Archibald MacLeish’s "Ars Poetica" where the words “muted,” “Dumb,” “Silent,” and “wordless” figure prominently. Wright’s first "Ars Poetica" not only expresses the silence of white space with separate lines but also through phrases such as “leaves without a word” (3) and “inarticulation of joy...” (9). Yet "Ars Poetica" also gives language and voices power by setting them up in contrast to silence.

"Ars Poetica" begins with a simple, conversational five-word line, set apart with white space and no punctuation. “I like it back here” it affirms, and a stanza break gives pause. “Back *where?*” we might ask in that pause. “Back” implies a hidden place, and in this way the poem seems immediately like a conversational introduction, a way of welcoming the reader into a backyard or other hidden place, like the intimacy of a certain
type of writing. The silence almost seems to give the reader a chance to survey “back here” before it picks up with the description. The poem continues with a descriptive quatrain of the landscape in what certainly seems like a backyard or garden. The second line provides more context for “back here,” situating the speaker “Under the green swatch of pepper tree and the aloe vera” (2). These two very disparate plants, sources of spice and soothing extracts respectively, already give the poem a sense of patchwork collage-like imagery, further emphasized by the word “swatch.” The next three lines, two beginning with anaphora, and the third a hemistich, create a pattern of words that too, seem collage-like in impression. Lines 3-5 read:

I like it because the wind strips down the leaves without a word.
I like it because the wind repeats itself,
and the leaves do.

Both of the lines beginning “I like it because the wind,” creates a repeating pattern echoing the first line and doing just as the lines say the wind and leaves do. The repetition of sounds here does exactly what the lines say nature does--repeats itself and creates patterns. Wright is showing how language is like nature in itself ability to create patterns. Interestingly though, he invokes the silence of nature again here. Like in “China Traces” we have a word that nature does not utter. “The wind strips down the leaves without a word” playing with the idea that nature’s language, while it “repeats itself” is a language of images, impressions and feelings rather than words. Wright’s poems, too, are very much collections of images, impressions and feelings, in spite of their being constructed of language, as is the case with most lyric poems. What differentiates Wright, though, are his blank spaces and gaps, which almost seem to be like the bareness or gaps of trees.
after the “wind strips down the leaves.” Wright’s trees then with their patterns and
breaks, are a metaphor for his poems as well. These lines also deeply echo Wallace
Stevens’ beginning to “The Motive for Metaphor,” in which Line 1 reads, “You like it
under the trees in autumn” and Lines 3-4 read, “The wind moves like a cripple among the
leaves/ And repeats words without meaning.” In fact, “Ars Poetica” seems like a clear
homage to “The Motive for Metaphor” when one compares the situation of being under
trees, wind stripping down leaves and the invocation of repetition to discuss language.
Wright has shifted the poem though to be from a first person perspective, seeming to
acknowledge himself as a subject of Stevens’ poem even.

The next stanzas continue the feeling of painterly composition. Again, we have a
line that stands apart from the rest of the poem next, but repeats the phrase “I like it.” The
echoing refrains create a sense of balance in a form that is not neat or metrically regular.
The next line reads, “I like it because I’m better here than I am there” (6). Still, we are
not sure what the difference between “here” and “there” is, but, accepting the reading that
the “back here” is a stand-in for the writing process, as certainly the landscape has been
equated with language, and the poem is titled “Ars Poetica” this line seems to elevate the
power of language by making the writer better, and the next several lines do work to
explain why. “Here” the speaker is:

Surrounded by fetishes and figures of speech:
Dog’s tooth and whale’s tooth, my father’s shoe, the dead weight
Of winter, the inarticulation of joy...

The spirits are everywhere. (7-10)
Certainly, there is a sense of collage in this, both in the images and the construction of the lines. We have items listed seemingly at random, but with weight and integrity of their own that ultimately come together, just as the miscellaneous items of a collage stand apart, are bound together and form a whole. Wright has explained, “The problem, of course, with a collage is that...the collage has to come together to look like something other than merely a collage” (Halflife 157). Here, the collage begins to come together to look like an explanation of why poetry is so transcendent and language is so important. The poem locates us in the world of language first, surrounding the speaker with “fetishes and figures of speech.” The line alliteratively allows for the attraction to the bizarre and metaphorical to preface a list that seems perhaps random at first.

A motley list of items, both physical and metaphysical, add to the collage feeling, but manage to come together. We have teeth from a dog and a whale, both of which could be simply read as parts of creatures that outlast the flesh and blood, but both of those particular types of teeth can also refer to specific types of fine art. Dog’s tooth is a particular type of pattern used in medieval architecture, again calling on the power of repetition as the poem so often does, and whale’s teeth were often the canvas for the art of scrimshaw, where engravings were made on bone to ensure their long survival, or outlast mortality. Again, Wright is deeply concerned with the power of art to outlast a human life, and the next items in the list also make this clear. After the dog’s tooth and whale’s tooth, “my father’s shoe, the dead weight/ Of winter, the inarticulation of joy” uses enjambment and ellipses to again call upon brief silences that can alter the reading of the poem. Read with the integrity of a single line (which is most certainly a facet this poem begs the reader to do with its single line stanzas), line 8 ends with the phrase “my
father’s shoe, the dead weight.” Without reading the next line’s “Of winter” this line seems to say that the dead weight is the speaker’s father’s shoe. Why would a shoe be significant, let alone dead weight? Perhaps it is a reminder of a father who has passed or a father who is far away. Certainly it is an item that could be nostalgic, and speaks to the identifying articles of clothing that mean a filial duty realized or neglected. It could even be a reference to “poetic” feet, meaning the father’s shoe is a representation of poetic forefathers, who Wright venerates, Pound and Stevens, for instance. The allusion to Stevens’ “The Motive for Metaphor” seems to support this. In any case, “the dead weight” in the context of the poem as a whole actually refers to “the dead weight/ Of winter.” Again, the unnatural line breaks create a sense of collage-like fragmentation, and give pause between thoughts and images.

“The dead weight/ Of winter” seems out of place in a poem about enjoying the “green” “back here,” but again, it adds to the collage effect, and shows how seasons become dissonant in Wright’s work. Winter may be dead weight, but it is still part of the scene that the speaker likes. Dead weight seems like it should be a hindrance to the transcendence of poetry, but in fact, it helps to elevate the poem. The next phrase, “the inarticulation of joy” is another place that words find inadequacy or silence. Here is the ineffable feeling, yet the poem makes an attempt at articulation simply by existing. The next line, another standalone line conjures the metaphysical realm: “The spirits are everywhere.” The spirits indicate that there is more to the world than what is seen.

The final lines of the poem are active and like the rest of the poem, fragmented and full of white space. Lines 11-18 unroll a magical scene, calling on the spirits from the line before and similar to the “charms and spells” of “China Traces”: 
And once I have them called down from the sky, and spinning and
dancing in the palm of my hand,

What will it satisfy?
I’ll still have

The voices rising out of the ground,
The fallen star my blood feeds,

this business I waste my heart on.

And nothing stops that.

Assuming “them” in line 11 refers to the spirits mentioned just before, the image of spirits “spinning and/dancing in the palm of my hand” suggests that language has incredible power. The idiom of having something or someone “in the palm of your hand” suggests control. The speaker seems confident in his ability to conjure and control the spirits, but then undercuts his sense of valuing this power with the question, “What will it satisfy?” While the speaker may have a sense that he can conjure and make spirits dance in his poetry, it is not enough to fulfill him.

Following the mystical language of spirits spinning and dancing, we are brought back to earth. Here, we find that the speaker still has “voices rising out of the ground” suggesting that there are more earthly matters that he cannot control. We also have “the fallen star my blood feeds,” which seems like the heavens are predatory in some way. A heavenly body has fallen, and is made earthly. Blood feeding the fallen star shows that sense of a lack of being sated, and echoes the question, “What will it satisfy?” Blood also
conjures that sense of mortality and even violence; the fallen star is sucking the very lifeblood from the speaker, and a melancholy follow-up echoes this. The list of items that the speaker “still” has ends in “This business I waste my heart on.” This line, set apart like so many other with white space seems like a devastated, yet resigned admission of the futility of whatever “this business” might be. Presumably, “This business” could refer to the act of writing poetry—the conjuring of images and spirits, the collage making. Because the poem is titled “Ars Poetica” it is certainly reasonable to assume that the business at hand is poetry itself. But wasting one’s heart on poetry does not seem like a celebration of language, but rather a lament of its inability to ever satisfy entirely. The speaker is bleeding out and being consumed by a fallen star, his heart wasted, but it is something that is endless. The final, ironic line confirms this sense of something that doesn’t satisfy, but must be continued. The poem ends “And nothing stops that.” Ending the poem with a statement of endlessness seems to be a comment on both the perpetuity and limits of language. In terms of content, the poem says that poetry doesn’t end, but formally the poem does just that. It stops short.

Wright’s second “Ars Poetica” appears in the collection *Negative Blue*. This poem is shorter and more formally symmetrical than the collage effect that the first “Ars Poetica” projects. At 12 lines, with fewer hemstitches and blank spaces, the poem seems more solid than others. “Ars Poetica II” begins with a statement of faith that seems to exude a confident wisdom of age: “I find, after all these years, I am a believer—”. Initially, because Wright has written so much about the idea of God, it is easy to read this as a statement of belief in God, and the poem both affirms and complicates that reading, but this is not the only reading. The line says only that he is a “believer” and the next
lines do not say in God. Perhaps what the speaker is a believer in then is language, or the
transcendent power of nature or anything really, which the dash suggests as well. The
speaker only says:

I believe what the thunder and lightning have to say;
I believe that dreams are real,
and that death has two reprisals;

I believe that dead leaves and black water fill my heart. (2-5)

Like in so many of Wright's poems, elements of nature are personified and given the
power of speech here. Believing in "what the thunder and lightning have to say" indicates
both a reverence for the power of nature, and because the poem is ars poetica, reverence
for the way natural images can convey bigger ideas with their drama and ability to be
Said," paying homage once again to a predecessor. The next two lines, one of the only
two instances of Wright's characteristic hemstitches in this poem, put the poem in the
realm of the abstract. Even though the poem refers to abstractions--"dreams," those
elusive and often unobtainable fantasies--it refers to them by affirming their existence. "I
believe that dreams are real," positions the speaker as an idealist, in spite of his admission
of age, "after all these years." In spite of the speaker's belief in dreams, though, he also
believes that "death has two reprisals," which seems to transition to a darker and more
cynical view of the world. "Reprisal" makes death seem retaliative, punishing for
something, perhaps a lack of adequate awe for its power. Perhaps as someone who
identifies as having aged, death claiming lives and approaching more rapidly forces the
speaker to reassess the possibility of the metaphysical realm, as a way of warding off fear
of mortality. The next line seems equally bleak, but with that anaphoric and hopeful repetition of “I believe” simultaneously retains a sense of rhetorical hopefulness. “I believe that dead leaves and black water fill my heart,” is a statement of gloom and heavy attachment to the earth. Two of Wright’s most common images of nature’s mutability, leaves and water, are imbued with desolation and mournfulness. These leaves are dead, and the water is black, opaque and devoid of light. Yet, the followup, “I shall die like a cloud, beautiful, white, full of nothingness,” is a hinge for the symmetrical poem, and a turn once again to hope. It has light, heavenly, empty imagery juxtaposed with the dark, earthy and bloated imagery that precedes it. Being tied to an earth that fills our hearts with dark, damp, weighty, earthy materials is the experience of life. Death, on the other hand, is alluring and blank, like the white spaces that litter Wright’s poems. It has the potential to be “beautiful” because of its ambiguity.

Lines 7-11 return to natural, heavenly imagery, associating light and the sky with language directly, as well as making allusion to another poet again—this time Pound. Natural imagery is equated with language and a system of symbols:

The night sky is an ideogram,

    a code card punched with holes.

It thinks it’s the word of what’s-to-come.

It thinks this, but it’s only The Library of Last Resort,

The reflected light of The Great Misunderstanding.

Again, we have an element of nature personified; here the sky is sentient, though mistaken in what it thinks. The metaphor of the night sky as “ideogram,/ a code card punched with holes,” certainly indicates that the sky represents something, but what that
something is, is both encoded and in the form of an ideogram—which is not a word, but a
way of communicating through an image, just as a Wright’s poems do. In other words,
the natural world continues to try to say something, but like in so many other poems, does
not do so clearly or without esoteric coding. Even the night sky itself seems to think it is
communicating one thing, that “it’s the word of what’s-to-come,” but it is mistaken. In
other words, natural elements are, once again, making a statement that is illegible,
inaudible, or at least nearly so. Continuing, “It thinks this, but it’s only The Library of
Last Resort/ The reflected light of The Great Misunderstanding,” the speaker takes on a
wisdom that is even greater than nature’s. By capitalizing “The Library of Last Resort”
and “The Great Misunderstanding” the poem lends a sense of reverence, or just as likely
mock-reverence, to these phrases. Certainly, by making these proper nouns, they take on
an almost biblical significance. There is a specific “Library of Last Resort” and a specific
“Great Misunderstanding.” So what exactly are these two specific things? It seems that
“The Library of Last Resort” might refer to a sense of grasping at a collection of
something that could be reassuring. In other words, instead of a library of books, it is a
library where the speaker looks to find belief, perhaps then as a collection of others’ ideas
who have tried to make sense of existential mysteries. “The Great Misunderstanding”
then is perhaps the misunderstanding that human beings have of the metaphysical or
spiritual realm, or the misunderstanding that they understand it. The line says that the
night sky is only “the reflected light of The Great Misunderstanding.” “Reflected light” is
a curious and paradoxical image in itself. Reflection seems to indicate that it is only a
shadow or artificial image of something, but light, already intangible, in reflection retains
all of its qualities. Light is what allows for a reflection to occur, and therefore is not
diminished by only being a reflection. The line suggests that "The Great Misunderstanding" is a source of joy, as reflected light is light that is enhanced.

Perhaps the most interesting reading of these lines is related to Ezra Pound, though, and his problematic "translations" of Chinese poetry. In R. John Williams' "Modernist Scandal: Ezra Pound's Translations of 'the' Chinese Poem," he explains Pound's mistaken understanding of ideograms. Pound, using the work of Fenollosa, translated a series of poems, even though, as Williams explains, "It was fairly common knowledge that Pound could not speak or write Chinese" (149). He continues,

In their attention to Chinese ideography, Pound and Fenollosa entirely misunderstood the nature of the Chinese writing system, fixating somewhat blindly on its more exotic secondary elements. Pound even thought that Chinese ideography was so pictographically transparent (as opposed to phonetic writing), that one could decipher the characters even without knowing Chinese. (150)

Pound used this as the basis for his views on new American, or Imagist poetry, which is perhaps "The Great Misunderstanding" "Ars Poetica II" refers to. With this in mind, Wright's great attachment to Pound as mentor gives the lines a new significance, specifically with regard to the mention of the night sky as ideogram. If "the night sky is an ideogram," that "thinks it's the word of what's-to-come" the night sky then is inscrutable, but seemingly translatable--like Pound's understanding of ideograms. The poem reflects the idea that, like Pound's "translations," we often think we can decipher the "code card punched with holes" but it is actually just an image that seems to be one thing, such as a card through which light shines, rather than the heavens revealing something about the other realm.
The last line is a haunting and ambiguous. It uses idiom and the ever-slippery notion of “God” and is set apart from the rest of the poem for emphasis. It reads, “God is the fire my feet are held to.” This seems a categorical statement of faith, but it is also not a faith that is comforting as investment in systems of faith so often are. Instead of reassuring the speaker of an afterlife and a loving patriarch, God is a painful means of motivating the speaker to do something. The idiom of holding someone’s feet to the fire indicates a demand for something, and in the case, the product is poetry. Of course, Wright’s notion of God, as he has admitted, has been formed by the doctrine of evangelicals, who famously invoke the fire and brimstone of Jonathan Edwards’ ardent sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” What though, is God to Charles Wright ultimately? He has made a number of statements on the nature of God, including “God is a river, he’s not the ocean” (Ajar 104), indicating that God is not as vast or unreachable as he is so often portrayed. He is also fluid then, flowing and changeable, but always composed of the same parts like a river. In Halflife, Wright offers a long list of what God is:

God is the air we breathe...God is the fear of the unknown...God is the metaphor for metaphor...God is photosynthesis...God is the moral law of nature...As must be fairly clear by now, God is, to me, whatever is under your feet and over your head and in your heart--pig-drool and up-in-the-air and the yelp from the grass...and a long list of nexts-in-line...God is the air we breathe...such a long string of black pearls...listen to the beads click. (109)

Wright’s vision of God then, is not exactly the conventional iconographic man with a beard, but the no less conventional image of ubiquity. Like Wright’s vision of God, his
poems are slippery and full of constant corrections. And Wright says, “all my poems are prayers and songs. Hymns” (Halflife 130). Wright’s natural images and attention to metapoetics then, are in fact an attempt at capturing some essence of the ineffable idea of God.

Charles Wright’s career long pursuit is the pursuit of putting words to those things that words cannot convey. Of course this is the project of every poet, but Wright manages to capture absences and ambiguities through his fragmented verse. Just as nature and God present mysteries and paradoxes, so does poetry, and Wright’s poetry in particular capitalizes on absences and breaks as a way of presenting a possible representation or explanation of these mysteries. Wright is quite aware of the broken-wholeness of his poems, saying, “To me the sum of the parts is always more interesting than the whole. It’s how you keep the parts together and keep them from becoming a whole that fascinates me” (Halflife 157). The tension between absence and presence, the dissonance between feelings and the seasons’ patterns, and the overwhelming project of making language live and become divine are what make Wright the heir to the throne of metaphysical poetry.
Works Cited


