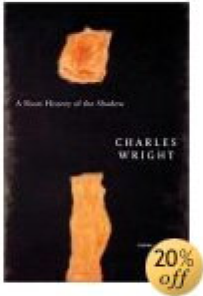

CHANGING SHADOWS

*A Short History of the Shadow.*Charles Wright. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002.

James Matthew Wilson

After the completion of *Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems,*the final volume of "trilogies" that compose Charles Wright's "The Appalachian Book of the Dead," Wright admitted on different occasions that he had not written any poems since. Where to go after three decades' of a formally and thematically consistent poetic excursus?

"I sit where I always sit . . . 1 March, 1998, where to begin again?" Wright asks on the first page of this new volume, which collects poems both straddling and contemplating the Millennium and its "blues." The answer, in fact, partly precedes the question; while Wright has entered into a distinct, new project, he does so by returning to perhaps overly familiar terrain and taking stock of it. Longtime readers of Wright will find much new here, but importantly, they will find that Wright himself has come to understand and critique his own achievement--providing, in some instances, what will almost certainly remain definitive interpretations of the previous volumes. The merits of this latest as poetry, for the very reason of its consistent interpretive stance, may be less certain.

Wright experienced early critical acclaim as a poet, winning the National Book Award for his first trilogy, *Country Music,*in 1982. One explanation for this success is that he tapped into the style and concerns of the High-Modernist poets and novelists perhaps better than any other of their heirs. The Moderns, to burn their varied geniuses down to an ashen paradigm, continually engaged two intellectual conflicts. First, they sought to vaunt the triumph of space over time, defying chronology and traditional, mono-directional narratives, in favor of a spatially-understood "patterning" of history, event and consciousness. Second, they established the concept of history as pattern writ-large, dwarfing yet retaining the essential role of the individual and eliminating time as anything but the metronome's rhythm to which ever-expansive historical cycles spun about the grid of events. They then took up positions relative to this cycle--some perceived it as the imprint of grand metaphysical or religious meaning on the physical universe, others thought it the mark of monotony and the immanent finitude of knowledge, while many more vacillated somewhere in between.

Wright's *The Southern Cross*(1981), where he portrays himself ranging through time (as if it were merely space) in search of affirmation from his own experiences and those of his family and his home regions, removed all doubt that he had taken on this mantel of the Moderns, particularly that of Ezra Pound, as a persistent and deepening project. His distinctly American anxiety about *needing*to inherit and possess a deep history akin to that of European culture coupled with an equally American desire to explore past, present and future as if they were an unsettled frontier, the setting for his own existential quest, have particularly aided Wright's Modernist drama. Such explorations grew ever-looser, through *Zone Journals*(1988), in which the chronology of journal form actually serves as scaffold for a life's

experiences and reading freely collaged. In *Chicamauga*he wrote of his young self:

*Memento scrivi,*skull-drunk and word-drunk,
                    one hundred fourteen pages
Of inarticulate self-pity
Looking at landscape and my moral place within it,
The slurry of words inexorable and dark

Wright's descriptive landscapes have earned him a reputation as a masterful, painterly poet. His constant questioning of the meaning of the seen, the heard or the desired--Cezanne-like layinger of image and idea into a many-leveled landsceape like that in Dante's great poem--all denote a scattered but constant search for, and of, a meaningful world. He wishes to understand his "moral place" in an objectively meaningful world, and yet the complexity of his poems comes from both dissatisfaction with any one trope, any one belief, set alongside nagging uncertainty about the possibility of language itself:

Overlay after overlay tumbled and brought back,
As meaningless as the sea would be
               If the sea could remember its waves . . .
               ("The Southern Cross")

And so Wright, in his new poems, continues the questioning while coming into a new self-consciousness about the entire enterprise:

What can I possibly see back here I haven't seen before?
Is landscape, like God, a Heraclitean river?
Is language a night flight and sea-change?

My father was born Victorian,
               Knee-pants and red ringlets,
Sepia photographs and desk drawers
Vanishing under my ghostly touch.
               ("Looking Around II")

The familiar reveries that fly, like blackbirds out of the backyard trees and into a sky of abstraction and back again, are all here. The sensation that real knowledge must be an upward movement, but also a search downward, toward one's past and ancestry, beat into the clay, and that each is elusive and hard to credit, also persists: the first, because it admits of musing irresponsibility or a kind of intellectual tourism through East and West (as any reference by an American to Buddhism of Chinese poetry usually is); the second, because memories, photographs and relics all decay with but varying speed:

After a time, Hoss, it makes such little difference
What anyone writes--
Relics, it seems, or the thing
          are always stronger than the thing itself.
    . . . . .
The faint odor of something unworldly, or otherworldly,
Lingering in the darkness, then not.
As though some saint had passed by the side yard,
                    the odor of Paradise
          ("Relics")

And yet much in this volume is shaded differently - is seen from a perspective far less peripatetic--as if Wright, "Getting too old and lazy to write poems" ("Body and Soul II"), had decided to bear down hard on land and memory, relic and sky. The result, actually, comes dressed as a fundamental shift in influence. Wright has always written in the shadow of Pound, his own style transforming the model's into one more colloquial and narrative, one that admits more of pleasure and comprehension if less of lyric intensity. This much has been clear since the beautiful homage "Landscape with Seated Figure and Olive Trees" and the more direct and less intriguing "Journal of English Days," in which Wright tries "to piece together / The way it must have been for someone in 1908 / Fresh up from Italy." Now Wright seems done with considering movement, preferring to contemplate light and darkness, dawn and dusk from a steady and well-worn chair. He has taken up, that is, the mantle of Thomas Hardy.

One poem from the volume, "In Praise of Thomas Hardy," suggests as much. Here, Wright affirms a popular conception of Hardy as a poet of metaphysical grimness: "No wonder deep shade is what the soul longs for, / And not, as we always thought, the light. / No wonder the inner life is dark." To the extent that this characterization is true, both Wright and Hardy have always had something in common. But beyond that, one must look to one of Hardy's nine or ten greatest poems, "Lying Awake," in which the speaker, like Descartes, demonstrates how well he can think and imagine without getting out of bed. As Hardy was a poet of grave reflection in a steady, bleak English landscape, Wright here is remaking himself as equally grave and equally lodged in place; though a few examples of his shifting collage movements remain, Wright has sat down to look at the familiar and to let it carry him only figuratively into the upper azure of contemplation. From there, he judges more plainly the role of poetry:

Our song resettles no rocks, it makes no trees move, it
Has come to nothing, this sour song, but it's all we've got
And so we sing it
                being ourselves
Matter we have no choice in.
                    ("Mondo Orfeo")

The insufficiency of nature and natural knowledge, as well as the harrowing needs that drive us to it, also come in for direct confessions: "What the river says isn't enough. / The scars of unknowing are on our cheeks" ("Summer Mornings"). Elsewhere, the potential irresponsibility noted above gets candidly attacked and, partly, redeemed: "It is a kind of believing without belief that we believe in" ("Why, It's as Pretty as a Picture"). Wright suggests, here and throughout the volume, that the continuity of his vision and concerns has perhaps cost him much time and some credibility without bringing him the sort of belief for which he longs; and yet, we now see a similar continuity of place allowing him to get above his own language and to question it powerfully. One last suggestion of this new stability crops up in contrasting the two poems "Nostalgia" and "Nostalgia II." In the first, Wright, too discursively, lays out the nature of its title-subject. If it does not succeed as great writing, it nonetheless presents a mature and direct summary of any contemplation of the past: ". . . lovely detritus smoothed out and laid up. // And always the feeling comes that it was better then . . ." The honesty is, in part, Hardy's honesty as is the theme. The latter poem embraces Wright's better-known techniques, sending us back to:

January, moth month,
                        Crisp frost-flank and fluttering,
Verona,
Piazza Brà in the cut-light,
                                Late afternoon, mid-winter,
1959 . . .

We are back, with a wink, in familiar territory (in fact, the poem is partly about first seeing Ezra Pound manuscripts), and that is fine. To enter again any of Wright's landscapes after having been

through any other (especially these most recent) is to learn and grow by refraction and reflection. If sometimes the language and images seem too oft repeated, if the constant taking up of entire philosophies as if they were plastic Lone Ranger masks to be tried on and worn only till the rubber band snaps sometimes exasperates, few poets writing today have created so elaborate and compelling a world--and none has done so from so vital and universal a backyard, where we can see "Afternoon sky the color of Cream of Wheat, a small / Dollop of butter hazily at the western edge."