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The "Hard Freight" Borne by the "Brave Child": Theological Humanism in the Poetry of Charles Wright and Gregory Orr

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Abstract
Using *Religion and the Human Future* by Klemm and Schweiker as a reference point, I argue for the placement of the Appalachian poets Gregory Orr and Charles Wright within the emerging thought of theological humanism, which emphasizes acceptance of the full spectrum of moods and the integrity of life, specifically life in this world. Although neither Orr nor Wright is a religious poet per se, their poetry illustrates that Christianity continues to offer meaning even in the absence of belief in literal resurrection.

Keywords
theological humanism, poetry, Charles Wright, Gregory Orr

Humans' understanding of God has changed over the centuries and millennia, but our search for modes of expression has not. This essay explores newer instances of the age-old endeavors of poetry and theology. A relatively new mode of doing theology, theological humanism, argues for a balance between offering reverence to God and cultivation of human potential and capability; it embraces the broad spectrum of emotion and experience, in whatever religious traditions human beings find themselves. This embrace and acceptance of all of existence, and the fragile nature of life is the focus of the poetry of Charles Wright and Gregory Orr. Wright's poetry points readers towards the fullness and wonder of finite, embodied

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existence, while also acknowledging the Christian culture that so thoroughly influences Wright and others. Gregory Orr seconds this move toward a humanistic understanding. Juxtaposing the poetry of Wright and Orr with theological humanism helps readers see a reconfigured Christian faith, that some may find both reassuring and challenging.

Wright and Orr's poetry and theological humanism address three issues that have sometimes been a hindrance to those struggling with Christian doctrine. First, belief need not be manifested only within the walls of a house of worship. Second, bodily resurrection or "heavenly afterlife" can be a stumbling block for modern minds, but there is a thought-provoking alternative to traditional teaching. Finally, there is the question of whether or not someone can encounter grace and salvation outside of Christianity. Wright and Orr answer "yes," though with certain important qualifications.

I. Nature and Transcendence

Intuitively, we know that nature pulls us outside of ourselves; we experience something besides our own embodied existences and the limited spheres they encompass. Wright and Orr reinforce this realization in their poetry and compel us to contemplate the changes that happen in nature and our tangible selves. Theological humanism argues for a re-balancing of humans' relationship with the natural world.

Wright's "Clear Night" includes images that a reader might expect: moon, sky, birds, and wind. This is not merely a reverie of one man sitting outdoors. Nature implants in the narrator a desire for transformation, yet does not respond in ways he might expect. A clear night is what it is: the moon follows its customary pattern; birds sing, or do not, according to their nature; "a cassia flower falls," as shedding and decay inevitably happen. Switching to first person, the poem continues with four lines, and with the anaphora of "I want."[1] With each line the narrator repeats a desire that corresponds to the images of nature in the first part. The narrator wants to be bruised by God, to be the color of the clear night sky. He wants to be "strung up," possibly by the "moon fingers"; to be "stretched," as are the piano strings attached to the "white keys and the black keys"; to be "entered and picked clean" as a bird might pick at a flower. The natural world may be content with its own state, but such is not always the case with people. Nature's response to human striving comes with a single word. "What?" say both the wind and the deadly castor beans. This "what" could imply many things. The natural world may not speak the same language as humans, may not understand. Or, the "what" may imply a questioning of the human narrator, as if to say, "are you sure you know what you want?" No matter what the narrator and readers want, the stars "start out on their cold slide" and "the gears notch and the engines wheel." The change that the narrator desires, that readers may also desire, is not necessarily the change

1. Charles Wright, *China Trace* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1977), 61.

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that happens. Like that of nature, our being will be transformed, but not in the personal ways we might like.

Readers will find similar tropes and images in the work of Greg Orr. ''November'' turns readers' attention away from the narrator's late-night indoor musings to the cows below his window and the change of seasons marked by frost.[2] The ''field'' of ''A Field in New England'' is the setting of what appears to be a resurrection, though of what or whom the narrator is not sure.[3] In ''The Brave Child'' we read about a daredevil boy who experiences the natural world as his playground, overcoming whatever potential dangers it may hold. As with Wright, Orr's focus on the natural world guides readers toward the notion that they can be at home with and in the world around them.

Theological humanism emphasizes proper valuation of this world. In *Religion and the Human Future*, David Klemm and William Schweiker argue that to move forward as religious and spiritual beings, people should avoid two significant distortions of thought: overhumanization and hypertheism. Overhumanization is the misuse and abuse of all the ways that humans shape reality, and it leads to, among other things, ecological endangerment.[4] Hypertheism is ''the conviction of a community or tradition that its faith and interpretation of God are one and the same with the divine, obviously true and ultimately real.''[5] The goal is a balance between human rationality and reliance on divinity. Using the classic humanist image of the garden, the authors argue that we must take care of the world around us, whether that care comes in the form of figuratively tending a garden, or literally preserving the ecology on which we rely.[6] Overhumanization leads us to manipulate the world around us, thinking that any means justify the end of human development, even as we imperil our own existence. Hypertheism contributes to this tendency, for it would tell us that we must learn to subdue nature, even as we hope to escape it. Klemm and Schweiker admit that this is a misinterpretation of Genesis's pronouncement that humans are to have dominion over the earth, but it is nevertheless a driving force in some strains of theology.[7] Like Wright's and Orr's poetry, theological humanism turns our attention to the natural world not merely for appreciation of a bucolic ideal, but to compel us to reconsider our relationship with the world around us.

2. Gregory Orr, *The Caged Owl: New and Selected Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2002), 159.
3. Ibid., 177
4. David Klemm and William Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 14.
5. Ibid., 15
6. Ibid., 97–99.
7. Ibid., 98.

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II. Salvation, Resurrection, and the Afterlife

A further challenge of this poetry and this way of doing theology comes with consideration of the natural end of all things and what may or may not happen afterwards; we are called to imagine that there is no heaven. Wright's work is not a lamentation for the loss of life and the finality of death, but rather simply describes the inevitable change that all life must endure. The title of the poem "Where Moth and Rust Doth Corrupt" from *China Trace* alludes to Matt 6:19. Jesus gives instruction regarding prayer, and says that the disciples should not lay up their treasures "where moth and rust doth corrupt" but instead in heaven. But heaven, says this poem, may be as ephemeral as the Gospel writer thinks this world is. Heaven holds the Big Dipper, but also the "nothingness" the Big Dipper "spills."[8] Emptiness is a recurring image in this poem, in the form of a constellation, "the outline of 10 crosses," "invisible groom," and a fly "sucked clean and full of the air." All these things are not nothing, but they are "ashes strewn though my life like old clothes." The concepts of heaven and eternal reward are as small as the stars in the sky, tiny remnants of something that once was, things once used but no longer. Just as the word "childhood" stands alone on the page, so may the narrator feel alone when considering his own relationship to Scripture, religious symbols, and hymns. The double stresses within many of the lines highlight the images of theses empty things that have passed: "old clothes," "childhood," and "fly's fall."

Denham comments that this poem conveys a kind of despondency.[9] The poem is not joyful, but neither is it steeped in misery. The poem gives no sense of sadness at the transient, changing nature of existence. Rather, it simply explains a state of affairs and perhaps conveys contentment with, or at least acceptance of, this state. Wright's characteristic line break in the second stanza for "family of dust" emphasizes humans' transient nature, but also a transformation, for this family is told to "lie back and regenerate." The concept of the Trinity ("father and son I step through") may itself be only an outline or an illusion, but it may be reborn given the chance. "I whisper into a different ear," says the narrator; he may make acts of confession, but not to a priest. "I mimic the tongues of green flame in the grass. / I live in the one world, the moth and rust in my arms." He is willing to embrace this world. It may be corruptible, but it is still worth treasuring, and it experiences its own type of rebirth.

In a similar vein, Greg Orr's "November" presents the possibility of an otherworldly life after death, but rejects this notion in favor of embodied, transient life. The Apostle Paul and Plato, the narrator observes late at night, would have us believe that the dead will be raised, either in heaven or in the more secular world of the forms.[10] Indeed, the narrator finds while browsing his bookshelf that "unless

8. Wright, *China Trace*, 50.

9. Robert D. Denham, *The Early Poetry of Charles Wright* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 77.

10. Orr, *Caged Owl*, 159.

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the dead are raised / there is no Christ, no heaven." The elements of Christian theology expressed in the allusion to 1 Corinthians 15 are all mutually dependent. If you lose the notion of heaven, or resurrection, or of Jesus as the Christ, the others fall away as well. The *Phaedrus* of pre-Christian, secular Plato is not that different in its description of the soul. It "painfully grows wings, longs to mount skyward." The soul is not just attached to the body, but imprisoned by it, and its release from prison comes only after arduous work.

Breaking a line to start a second stanza, the narrator then names his own god, desire, which stands in stark contrast to the Platonic and Christian notions of renunciation of the physical self. Desire "resides in *this* world," and is borne afloat on a "sea of ghosts." This second set of lines does not convey a particularly welcoming or pleasant god. This god-as-desire comes and goes with the spirits of the departed, those the narrator might wish to see again but who are present only ethereally. And just as the tides and the moon come and go in phases, so will desire, with predictable consistency.

The poem does not end there, however. His god, desire, is still there at the light of day. Signs of the turning of the season and the constancy of life appear together. Frost comes with the inevitable cooling that fall brings, yet life persists in warm bodies. Even the title of the poem points to this interplay of life, death, and hope. November is a time which leads to the cold of winter, the death of another year, but November is not itself the time of the winter solstice. The narrator's god is still there, in the curious form of desire, represented by the warm mammalian bodies of three cows. Verdant life persists, even in this corporeal, changing world. Though winter causes green grass to go dormant and to appear white with frost, grass will return in time. The bovine threesome create "shapes in the frost like hopeful boats." This is not a heavenly, otherworldly trinity, but a corporeal sign of something to carry one across "sorrowful water."

As with Wright's poems, Orr's work utilizes images and ideas that resonate with theological humanism. Readers are discouraged from thinking that God resides somewhere "out there" and that we are meant to shed our physical selves in order to join God at some future point. Klemm and Schweiker write, the "religions too often picture the physical world as the domain of death and sin that must be escaped," and it is in the demeaning of the natural world that a sustainable future is threatened.[11] It is not some otherworldly realm that brings hope, but rather this world and the living creatures that inhabit it. Union with God, if it is to happen, will not occur "out there" or "up there," as biblical interpretation would have us believe; God as a heavenly deity is a metaphor, not a literal description of existence.[12]

Orr's "A Field in New England" is a mere nine lines, but just as the poem indirectly describes the tomb of Jesus' burial without ever naming him, so does it draw the reader's attention to the possibility, though perhaps not actuality, of

11. Klemm and Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future*, 98.

12. Ibid., 42.

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a resurrection. The title and the three questions lead us to a scene that both is and is not the burial site of Jesus of Nazareth. "What angel rolled it? / Releasing whom? Where / is the cave?"[13] The author does not describe Judea, but a field in New England, and this change of location is emphasized by offsetting "Where" to its own line. There is no angel present in the poem, but the poet assumes an angel moved the boulder. We do not know whose grave it was, and indeed, there seems to be no grave at all in this field. There is not even a cave. The questions of the poem lead only to further questions: Was it a good thing that a grave was disturbed? Was a body stolen? Whose? Was someone resurrected? Is this scene even what we think it is? There is no cave, no burial spot at all. "Everything / has become invisible / except this granite boulder / that blocked the door / to the tomb." Each line is a biblical allusion, yet coupled with the title, they remind readers that they are not reading about a scene from the Bible. Resurrection is perhaps possible, but if it does take place, it is not where we would expect.

An insistence on a literal resurrection for Jesus and for those who believe in him is a central feature of hypertheism, argue Klemm and Schweiker. In its most extreme form, hypertheism takes the form of a militant and exclusive fundamentalism. Adherents of fundamentalism see as its primary benefit salvation, which comes in the form of "redemption *from* a world drenched in sin, decadence, and chaos."[14] Such an insistence on being redeemed from this world, however, makes impossible redemption *for* this world. We must be willing to let go of the notion of some heavenly life after death, or at least make that notion secondary to the preservation and sanctification of life in this world.

Wright realizes that believers may have difficulty wrestling with such ideas. His collection *Hard Freight* is aptly titled, containing oblique references to the poems it contains.[15] Whether 'freight' implies what one carries, or (to revive an early use of the word) money for passage, the reader will understand that the book's contents are serious matters. The subjects of the poems (such as night, fever, or "The Other Side") are not necessarily negative or ominous, but the potential for harm or detriment is certainly present. Whatever meaning can be won from literature, life, or a journey will come only after exertion. Life is hard, gaining knowledge is hard, and dealing with the uncertainty of whatever does or does not come after life is hard. Wright's poems do not indicate, however, that carrying the freight, or making the journey, is necessarily unpleasant. The hard freight of life simply is.

Wright has stated that his poems deal with religious ideas and the impossibility of salvation, except in the natural world.[16] Readers can see evidence of an early struggle with faith and Christian teachings in "Northhanger Ridge": Wright tells his readers, by means of a brief stamp of date and place, that this poem concerns

13. Orr, *Caged Owl*, 177.

14. Klemm and Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future*, 153.

15. Wright, *Hard Freight* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1973).

16. Wright, *Halflife* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 82–83.

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"Bible Camp, 1949."[17] At Bible camp he learned that "Drifting up from the next life, / The heat-waves, like consolation, wince—." That is, the next life holds the potential of a hot and damning place; relief from the heat (other-worldly or otherwise) does not come, as the clouds stay shut. "Or so I remember it." Others may have had different impressions of this Bible camp, but Wright's memories are not pleasant. He recalls feeling heat, seeing the hill nearby as looking like a crocodile, and hearing voices "like shards of light."[18] Furthermore, the stories learned at Bible camp come with ambiguity: "This is the same story... The page stripped of its meaning." Perhaps rote memorization and proof-texting stripped the page of meaning. Again, readers find a typical double stress, emphasizing particular images: a cloud "stays shut"; and the Bible lesson's throat is "dark water." Wright does not dismiss religion in general, nor Christianity in particular, but readers can tell that he has a difficult relationship with the traditional teachings one would find at Bible camp.

Similar ideas pervade the ninth poem of the cycle "Skins." "The earth is what salivates... A sure sheet for the resurrection."[19] Langdon Hammer comments that Wright is "anxious" to find an alternative to the Christian promise of resurrection.[20] Wright certainly returns many times to this topic, but readers may hesitate to label him as "anxious." Wright's concern is to communicate his own acceptance of humans' natural decay and (perhaps) continuance in nature, a process that itself constitutes a kind of salvation. Although the poem speaks of resurrection, the likelihood of physical resurrection is called into question, for "The earth is what follows you / Tracing your footsteps, counting your teeth."[21] God may know the number of hairs on your head, but the earth follows each person, and knows the number of enamel-hardened teeth that will remain when the rest of the body has turned to dust—"father / and son, father and grandson, / A knife, a seed, each planted just deep enough." As a young son becomes a father himself, a father becomes a grandfather; as a seed is planted to create a new generation, so must earlier generations be "planted" in the earth, so that regeneration may take place. We cannot escape returning to the earth, further life always comes into being. Like a phoenix overcoming its own death, "birds from your sleeve burst into flame." Rebirth is not a supernatural magic trick, a trick which itself will burst into flame, but rather an inevitable natural process. "You try for the getaway," reads the final line, "by the light of yourself." This flame is finite, but not without promise. Moreover, this flame is not connected to a particular set of beliefs or religious practices.

Lest readers think that Wright is bemoaning his loss of belief or his ambivalence towards traditional religious concepts and doctrine, they should note the lack

17. *Hard Freight*, 51.

18. Ibid., 50.

19. Wright, *Bloodlines* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 59.

20. Langdon Hammer, "The Latches of Paradise," *American Scholar* 74.4 (Autumn, 2005): 74.

21. Wright, *Bloodlines*, 59.

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of sadness or pity in his tone. His poems are not jubilant, but neither are they mournful. They present a matter-of-fact state of affairs, a world in which one would do well to appreciate the natural world around him or her, before such a world and its earth literally wrap around one's mortal remains. He has no wish to hasten this eventuality, but neither does he fear it. As Hammer writes about "Appalachian Autumn," Wright's "subject is rain and decomposition, the sad, sodden end of things. The world he describes goes on trying to communicate with us; bare branches become 'the latches of paradise.'"[22] Again, readers might question Hammer's descriptor "sad." At first glance, a rain-soaked landscape might strike one as sad, but Wright conveys a sense of peace with many such images. If one seeks union with something holy, Wright points him or her towards the "sacred dimension of the natural world." It may seem paradoxical that the lines between transcendent and mundane are so thoroughly blurred. But if Wright presents paradoxes, they are not problems, says McCorkle, but rather passages that offer insight.[23]

Readers should not think, however, that Wright holds only disdain for Christianity. About his own religious upbringing Wright has said, "I fight against it, but I wouldn't change it for anything."[24] His critical eye comes from his own experiences, such as when he fainted from hunger at about age ten while trying to perform his duties as an altar boy. "I was all right," he says, "but that all seemed a little foolish to me. A ten-year-old can't eat before he takes the wafer and the wine?"[25] Wright is not willing to either denounce or affirm religion in its entirety, but he realizes the pull that it can have on people, including himself. But we should not avoid considering things like fear of death, religious obsessions, and concerns about an afterlife. He says he has an "increasing sense of, I guess, ease in what I've always been trying to get a handle on...why not just sit it out in the open and talk to it."[26] In another interview, Wright says about poetry, "They are stairways to whatever god is for me. Poems are the only things that are going to put the coin between my teeth and to get me my ride across the river, as it were."[27]

Orr also grapples with youth and age, life and decay, the dialectical elements of life in "The Brave Child." We don't know how old the diving one is, but "little Lazarus" reinforces the "child" of the title. It also seems reasonable to conclude this is a boy rather than a man, since boys are more likely to take dares than adults.

22. Hammer, "Latches of Paradise," 74.
23. James McCorkle, "Charles Wright," *American Poets Since World War II, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Joseph Conte (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1996), 274.
24. Miriam Marty Clark and Michael McFee, "A Conversation with Miriam Marty Clark and Michael McFee," *Charles Wright in Conversation*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008), 50.
25. Robert D. Denham, "An Interview by David Remnick," *Charles Wright*, ed. Denham, 23.
26. Willard Spiegelman, "An Interview by Willard Spiegelman," *Charles Wright*, ed. Denham, 113.
27. Stan Sanvel Rubin and William Heyen, "Metaphysics of the Quotidian: A Conversation with Stan Sanvel Rubin & William Heyen," *Charles Wright*, ed. Denham, 64.

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This boy proves he can make it all the way down to the water's bottom by retrieving a handful of moldering goo, and then coming back up.[28] He can go down to the "deepest bottom dark with the rot," down to places of death and burial and decay. He returns "with the oozing proof clutched in his fist." This gesture holds the evidence and celebrates the victory he has won.

This innocent and vulnerable one is also very capable and might have us believe he is invulnerable. Not only will he dive down deep, he will also climb up high and take a flying leap, (the subject of the second stanza), not knowing or choosing to ignore whatever danger might be present. In his leap the boy falls "with arms spread like a Christ ascending." Children are capable of injury, and death, but they usually, somehow, remain unaware of this, at least for a time. Perhaps the boy thinks there is some small chance that he will fly rather than fall. Despite their youthful, vibrant, dare-taking selves, children are no more able to be physically resurrected than an adult, so our enlightened minds tell us. Children, however, also remind us of a time when we may have been more willing to believe in such things as physical resurrection. The faith of a child, with the informed maturity of age, is one goal of theological humanism.

Biographical readings have not been in vogue since the advent of New Criticism, yet some knowledge of Gregory Orr's life is informative. Orr has been open about the events of his life in some of his earliest poems, his commentaries, and his memoir, *The Blessing*. One can read the heartache and perplexity that the adolescent Orr experienced upon the death of his own brother. When Orr was twelve years old, he and his father and brothers were out early one morning on a hunting trip. During a routine activity of checking to make sure all cartridges had been discharged from their rifles, Orr accidentally shot and killed his eight-year-old brother.[29] Understandably, his life and the lives of the other members of his family were shaped by this event, and no doubt his personal theology was as well. What god or heaven could possible make sense after this event? Better to find the divine in *this* world, if that is possible. Thus many of Orr's poems include images of the natural world, sometimes juxtaposed with allusions to biblical stories. The strangeness of the resurrection story is made all the more strange with a scene that includes nothing but a boulder. A child defies death, takes dares, takes risks in ways that we wish everyone could. Some of Orr's poems point to his deep sense of loss, while others include hints of triumph and salvation, and still others incorporate both. The religious imagery of Orr's poems directs readers to let go of many traditional religious concepts, while maintaining a sense of religious awe.

III. Christianity and Other Religious Traditions

If there is a way to let go of the concept of physical resurrection of individuals, then there is also a way to let go of other theological concepts, or to allow them to be

28. Orr, *Caged Owl*, 112.

29. Orr, *The Blessing* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2002), 13.

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transformed. Thus if we can transform our notions of resurrection and grace, we may be able to transform our thinking about other religions.

Wright's poem "Grace" shows readers that God's generous gift is probably not what they would expect. This theological concept is anthropomorphized with matted hair, and this hair is "a fine weed."[30] It is beautiful and delicate, but like a weed, difficult to control. The hair is matted because something has "fallen repeatedly," indicating that humanity is not necessarily evil, utterly depraved, or fallen, but certainly fallible and incapable of permanently righting itself. Grace's arms are rivers that become one with the earth. Like flowing water that disappears from sight but does not cease to exist, grace is mysteriously both present and absent. "Its face is a long soliloquy," the poem tells us. A long, solitary speech is familiar enough, but grace's words are not words: the soliloquy is in code, in numerals, and it is "impossible to erase." In other words, grace's language is permanent, if perplexing, and it has nothing to do with a particular religious tradition.

Returning to Wright's "Northhanger Ridge," we see further evidence of his struggle with Christianity. "Sunday, and Father Dog is turned loose," begins the second section. Those familiar with Wright's work as a whole may note how here and elsewhere he plays with the word "God" and its anagram, "dog."[31] As Chitwood points out, Wright's play with the words "God" and "dog" is not just for fun, or to demonstrate particular affection for canines. Wright sees "meaning in the everyday, the ordinary. In the wink of an eye, a dog can become a messenger of God."[32] The father-figure/dog/God is given free reign, says the poem, but the wind backs off. There is no cool relief of a breeze or of the Holy Spirit. This Bible camp presents its message in the form of "Bow-wow and arf, the Great Light; / O, and the Great Yes, and the Great No."[33] The physical camp itself is no more inspirational, for the Gospel writers "stare from their four corners" sharing no sparkle or "glitter" with the campers. Though Jesus claimed that even the stones would cry out if his followers were silenced, such is not the case with this "evangelical masonry."[34] Christ is present, but not a healing Christ; He Himself is sick. Where the children pray is "a dark room," which could provide some cool relief, but it "burns like a coal." The moon itself cannot find comfort, as it "twists and turns in its sheets." Danger lurks in one of the corners, in the form of a black widow. Finally, salvation "sleeps like a skull in the hard ground." The idea of life after death is as dead as the one who is now only a skull. Wright's works as a whole are not without hope, but the reader must go somewhere besides the Bible camp at Northhanger Ridge to find it. It is a hard lesson, hard freight, to learn that things

30. Wright, *Hard Freight*, 34.

31. *Halflife*, 81.

32. Michael Chitwood, "Gospel Music: Charles Wright and the High Lonesome," *Iron Mountain Review* 8, Charles Wright issue (Spring, 1992): 23.

33. Wright, *Hard Freight*, 51.

34. Ibid., 52.

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are not what they purport to be, and that what is proffered to youth may be far from benevolent and innocent.

What many gain from Bible camp is not comfort and re-creation of the spirit, but rather knowledge of the fallibility of church and preacher. Rather than preach the gospel to glorify God, the Bible camp of Wright's childhood makes Scripture an end in itself. This is one of the dangers about which theological humanism warns. Theological humanism calls us to take up the hard freight of overhauling our religious beliefs. We need not renounce Christianity, but we must acknowledge its fallibility. For "centuries, theologians have worked out concepts for thinking of human experiences of the divine," write Klemm and Schweiker. "It is time for the religions to catch up with theology."[35] Believers must learn and relearn that Scripture, Bible camps, and religious practice are not supposed to be merely self-affirming objectives, but means by which we can affirm the integrity of life. Klemm and Schweiker acknowledge that what is entailed in "the integrity of life" is the subject of ongoing debate, but that this debate itself affirms both God and humanity.[36]

Wright's collection *Bloodlines* reinforces the idea that conviction in faith may be a desired outcome of religious practice, though this outcome may never be entirely reached. The notes to the ninth poem of "Tattoos" comment that this poem is about "temporary evangelical certitude"[37] and the reader may well place emphasis on "temporary." Evening does not so much as fall, as take aim at one with its "fixed crosshairs;"[38] here, the cross is not a symbol of salvation, but reminder that the dusk and twilight of life come to everyone. Theologians and interpreters, says the poem's narrator, have their song, speak of light, drop baptismal water. But the drop "is always falling," never coming to rest, never completing its course to the one who would be baptized. "Over again I feel the palm print," says the poet, presumably a print from a hand of blessing, "The map that will take me there."[39] But as the notes remind the reader, this print is temporary; the map and the "there" are not constant. Nor is the "where" of the "there" known to the reader, for there is always another "there," another destination, another journey to perhaps a final resting place. The poem encourages readers to let go of the hypertheistic notion that baptism, blessing, and heaven are the exclusive purview of Christianity. By extension, readers can conclude that they are not exclusive to any religion. Wright's poems and theological humanism present the idea that the process of being made whole and holy may be fulfilled via some religion besides Christianity, or through some other form of communion.

Wright's poems implicitly invite readers to consider other possible forms of communion, as they point readers towards particular aspects of Chinese culture

35. Klemm and Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future*, 163.

36. Ibid., 164.

37. Charles Wright, *Bloodlines* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1975), 39.

38. Ibid., 27.

39. Ibid., 27.

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and Buddhism. Familiarity with Wright's background illuminates this aspect of his work. Wright visited China in the late 1980s though his interest in China and Buddhism predates this experience.[40] The poets of the T'ang Dynasty were especially influential, because of their ability to "show us how to get personal emotions out of a real landscape."[41] The title *China Trace*, he says, indicates a "road to somewhere" and "the attempt to follow the road to a Chinese resolution of certain emotional aspirations."[42] Regarding just what this "Chinese resolution" is, Wright only hints: traces are shadowy erasures, and his poems, like those of the Chinese poets he admires, employ a brevity and economy of words.

A more recent poem, "A Short History of My Life," displays his ongoing concern with cycles of life and death.[43] He contrasts himself with the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, whose work was instrumental in the development of Buddhism. Lao Tzu's beginning was miraculous, and the subject of folklore; Wright's was not. Although Wright was born on a Sunday morning, he was "untouched by the heavens," a point emphasized by one of Wright's often-used offset lines. Unlike Lao Tzu, Wright was not born old and wise, but with "the shadows of twilight" in his heart. The elements of his poetry (e.g., the "dun-colored buffalo" of *Buffalo Music*) "were dragon years from then," he writes, yet the concern with endings was with him from the beginning. The last stanza directs readers to "Fast-forward some forty-five years." Wright advances in age, as we all must. Whatever we look for, "in history" or elsewhere, will be found "nowhere but here." This non-specific "here," says the poem, is made up of natural elements common to many of his poems: lilacs, evergreens, grasses. It is the "world in its dark grace." A final offset line summarizes Wright's goal for life: "I have tried to record it." His work is not to save the world "in its dark grace," or to convert it, but to present it and preserve it in his writing.

Though Wright does not focus explicitly on Buddhism, readers may recognize the concept of *samsara* — the cycle of suffering, death, and rebirth — as a theme. As each person recognizes the existence of this cycle, she or he is better able to transcend it. Like the turning of the seasons, like the death and decay of human flesh, change is a necessary element of life. In accepting this, we are freed from care. Theological humanism would add that as we are freed from awaiting salvation in the hereafter, we are able to better redeem the world and humanity in the here and now. The treatise *Religion and the Human Future* has no specific discussion of Buddhism; indeed, the authors' language is continually couched in Christian terms, and they almost exclusively draw upon Christian theologians. The overall argument of the book, however, encourages Christian readers to allow their faith to be informed by other traditions.

40. Denham, ed., *Charles Wright*, 7.

41. Wright, *Halflife*, 132.

42. Ibid., 133.

43. Wright, *Bye-and-Bye* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 142–43.

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IV. Conclusion

Neither the proponents of theological humanism, nor Greg Orr, nor Charles Wright, I contend, would tell readers that poetry is a cure-all, that finding the right combination of words or metered incantation will bring salvation, redemption, or enlightenment. Nor will studying theological humanism or anyone's poetry resolve all the differences that exist between and within religions. New ways of doing theology, however, and the insights of poets can help us to flourish in our daily lives and find redemption for each other and the world around us. Having had some acquaintance with these strains of thought, Christians may find themselves reassured in the blessings that God has promised, and challenged to reassess continually their notions about the nature and scope of those blessings. Those who resist the labels of particular religious traditions may be pleased to discover an ingress into a conversation they had previously thought closed to them.

Author biography

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