



Charles Wright. Photograph by William Stafford.

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES WRIGHT

Carol Ellis

CHARLES WRIGHT IS the author of a number of books, including *The Grave of the Right Hand* (1970); *Hard Freight* (1973); *Bloodlines* (1975); *China Trace* (1977); *The Storm and Other Things*, translations of Eugenio Montale (1978); *The Southern Cross* (1981); *Country Music: Selected Early Poems* (1982); and *The Other Side of the River* (1984).

In October, 1985, Charles Wright traveled from his home in Charlottesville, South Carolina, to read his poems at the University of Iowa. While visiting the campus, he was also interviewed in a question and answer session sponsored by the Writers' Workshop and conducted by Jorie Graham. He wrote in "Ars Poetica" (*The Southern Cross*) about "this business I waste my heart on." In this interview he speaks passionately about "this business" for which he is willing to dangle, at times, in the space between language and silence.

My question comes from an interview you did at Oberlin. . . . You were discussing form and said, in the words of Philip Larkin who was quite the formalist, that he really felt form was unimportant and content was everything. Would you care now, about ten years later, to re-comment on that in the light of the new formalists and the new language poets at the other extreme?

Who are the new formalists?

Well, it seems to me that every time I pick up a magazine, if there are three poems in the magazine, two are in formal meter.

Larkin's comment was "Form means nothing to me. Content is everything." My comment would be that content means nothing to me. Form is everything. He doesn't mean what he said, really, any more than I mean what I say. But I think he means it less than I do, which is to say, once you become an absolute master at formal qualities

as he was it's of no immediate preoccupation. It's just something you do. Then, what you have to say is what matters.

I said what I just said, I hope, more or less humorously, but I also mean it, which is to say that to me the most vital question in poetry is the question of form. Form lies at the heart of all poetical problems. I don't mean "forms"—I don't mean sonnets, sestinas, rondeaus, quatrains, triplets. I mean Form with a big "F." UFO—Ultimate Formal Organization, if you wish. That may be extra-poetical in some sense. But I'm quite concerned with form and structures and the architecture of form. I'm one of those people who think that content has nothing to do with subject matter. I think there's form, there's subject matter, and then there's content. Content is what it all "means," somehow. Subject matter is what it's "about." Form is how you organize it. Content in that case would be like a Greek chorus standing behind the point and informing it. I don't know that I'd want to go on the Johnny Carson Show and explain this, but I feel it's true.

I write only in free verse, and I feel about free verse the way Frank Stella feels about abstract art: my life is dedicated to it. But formal issues involved in free verse are at the front of my consciousness at all times.

I think I know what the content of most of my poems is or swirls around, in the same way that Larkin knows how to write a poem. Now what the subject matter's going to be to lead to that content is going to differ from point to point. The form, the glue that holds the free verse lines and structures together, is always changing because I'm always trying to do something I don't quite know how to do, so, in a way, it's always a failure. That doesn't answer your question, though.

No, that's fine. Wouldn't it be possible to be abstract in a fixed poem?

Oh, I would probably think so. All you have to do is make unintelligible language. I mean, abstract how? Do you mean formally abstract or do you mean . . .

Content. Subject matter. I'm not sure. . . .

Sure, you could. The difference I'm making between "forms" as accepted traditional forms and Form is again one I wouldn't want to go to the wall for—but I feel it, or know it somehow. As Roethke said, "I long for the quietness at the heart of form." Well, he doesn't mean "forms." He doesn't mean a sonnet. He means Form. Organization. The secret of the universe is Form, but I don't lay all that on poems. Poems are not the secret of the universe. They're only clues to the

secret of the universe.

How would you say the “dead” operate in The Southern Cross? Is it formal principle or subject matter or content?

I knew I was going to get my ass in a crack if I said this. Do you mean the poem or the book?

Really, the dead operate throughout the entire book.

Well, certainly, in the “Homage to Paul Cézanne,” it is the subject matter of the structure of the poem; it’s where I first thought I could juxtapose associational phrases and lines toward a nonlinear effect that when put back together, would give a reconstituted, realistic picture. In other words, I was trying to write a realistic poem by nonlinear, nonrealist means. That was how it started. The dead was chosen as a subject matter because that seemed the most tactile abstract thing I could think of, since everyone knows what they are physically, and, if you read poems, you know what they are metaphysically.

I also . . . used to in the past . . . write a lot about the dead. Again it is a kind of informative background to my everyday life, in a strange sort of way. An awful lot of my relatives have disappeared. But that isn’t why I was obsessed about it; it just seemed to be something necessary for me to write out of, or to write against. As Dylan Thomas said, “You write for the great dead.” You do. You try to write for your betters. If you don’t write for your betters you’ll be writing for your lessers, and you won’t write worth a damn. As far as throughout *The Southern Cross*, it became, as I say, this juxtaposition of phrases and lines.

It started out, as I say, as lines and phrases in the “Homage to Paul Cézanne.” At the end of *The Southern Cross*, it became sections juxtaposed against each other—again trying to take an overtly abstract or nonsequential thing and having it, at the end, somehow coalesce or cohere into a representational object. Again, I think that’s how Cézanne does it in his painting, what little I know of it—the colors juxtaposed one to another, no straight line in the whole picture, and then you step back, and there are houses and everything else down there if you get back far enough. Then, in a book called *The Other Side of the River*, the sections, the phrases, the sentences, the stanzas, got even more juxtaposed one to another under the umbrella, to mix the metaphor, of a title which will tell you what it all is supposed to be concentrating on.

Since then, I've started to do something called verse journals. They're more quotidian, and by being more quotidian, they will be more metaphysical at the same time, in some strange kind of way that probably only I perceive. I've done five of them—three short ones of about fifty lines and two ten-page ones. They are diaristic in nature, as they pertain to what's going on day to day, but I don't do it day to day. I do it when I can, and then make the entry. But again, this is juxtaposition of stanzas and subject matters, hoping to come to some kind of overall organization. Right now, I'm in the ninth-and-a-half month of a year-long one called the "Journal of the Year of the Ox." I picked the right year because it certainly is slow and plodding. It's surely going to be a huge folly, but it's fascinating to try to do something that started out as phrases and lines in "Homage to Paul Cézanne" about seven years ago now, trying to do a year's worth of juxtapositioning and get a structure out of a year's poem. As I say, it's a journal, but it's in lines. So it has to be, one, conversational and, two, a poem. Or at least it has to be verse. Of course, I hope it's more than all of that. It is the largest reconstruction I've ever tried. And that's what poetry is, of course, a reconstruction. You have to redo it, which is why style is so important. Style is so important because that's how you reconstitute it. Anyway, another part of my spatial theory of free verse is that structure resembles a giant spider web. It's endlessly expandable, but within a framework. The secret, of course, is to find the framework. To have found the framework for this journal may have proven impossible. The year, obviously, is one reference. That's the skin structure of the poem. But you also have to make interior structuring devices so you know yourself you haven't just been vamping for a whole year—that there are three or four points the whole thing hangs on, that it does make a strange circular movement. I think art does try to be circular somehow. It will be the most conversational, chatty, didactic one of them all, if I ever finish it.

Are the structuring devices of this poem internal?

I do want to talk about that, but no one will know what they are. I grew up in a little town called Kingsport, Tennessee, on the Holston River, a river about the size of the Iowa River. But it has two forks that meet at Kingsport. And in the middle of one of these forks is an island called the Long Island of the Holston. The Long Island of the Holston was the sacred meeting ground of the Cherokee Nation. The poem starts out mentioning this. Around April I bring it up again. Then, in September, I bring it up again, and then, in December, I hope to bring it up for a last time. The point being that Long Island saw the

last moment of the Cherokee Nation as a nation; it was the last moment before the old fabric was broken for good and the West was opened in the United States. There was a battle there called the Battle of Island Flats, in 1776, and when the Cherokees were defeated, they were dispersed for all intents and purposes. The Wilderness Road was started from the island to Kentucky. Another group went down-river to open up Tennessee, and then the whole migration that had come down the central valley of Virginia through this little pocket went over into Kentucky, Ohio, then into the Midwest. So it was a very important moment in the history of the United States—also, naturally, in the history of the Cherokee Nation. I, growing up there, didn't know anything about any of this. That was one frame. I also knew that in the middle of the year I was going to Italy—to a part of Italy that had been very important to me in my writing, a place I obsessively keep going back to in my work. So part of the internal structure is based on these four references to the sacred places of the Cherokee Nation and, in the middle, a long meditational thing about Italy, a sort of sacred place to me.

Now, that should mean nothing to anybody here as a structural pattern, but it's very important to me to know I'm not just playing around—that I am trying to keep things whole and that there is a formal organization to this. The more formal and the more disguised I can keep the organization, the happier I am.

Can I ask about "Skins" and "Tattoos" where you put the subject matter at the end in those notes?

Well, I didn't want to do it narratively, so I put the narrative in a note and tried to do it imagistically. They were built on an imagistic frame and they move imagistically, so if you didn't have the notes, it would seem to me there was no reference point in the poem. Perhaps an unfair way of getting a reference point, but it seemed to tell everything in a phrase without spending time going through a discursive explanation, which, at that time, I found boring in poems.

What made you think of putting it at the end? Was it that sort of choice to look it up or not look it up?

Because I wanted my ideal reader, which could only have been me, of course, to read through the whole thing and say, "This is fabulous, but what the hell is it all about?" then come to the end and say, "Oh, that's what it's all about," and then go back and read it all over. Of course, that doesn't often happen. But you've got to write for the better part

of yourself, who will do what you hope some other person out there may do. "Skins" and "Tattoos," of course I wanted one to be very concrete, about emotional, psychic tattoos in my life. I finally called the second one "Skins" because that was what the tattoos were on, and they were more spatial, larger questions. I had notes to them all along, but I didn't put them in until I put together *Country Music*. They were conceived imagistically, and that's part of the problem with my concept of structuring now: how to get a narrative quality into the poems, still using an imagistic framework, without having to put in cute little notes. And that's how this structuring device I've been talking about slowly evolved, trying to get some kind of narrative skin on an imagistic framework, because I think they still move imagistically. If I could move them narratively, I would, but I don't think I do that very well. My narrative is terribly slow and ponderous.

It seems like it works that way wonderfully except they're always in tension, and I can feel that's sort of boredom with narrative.

It is basically boredom. To my mind, Mr. Frost didn't have any boredom at all with narrative because he could really do it, but I can't. Of course, we've moved into a nonnarrative world. No, that's not true. Narrative poems are probably coming back with the new formalists.

I was wondering if you could speak about a formal framework for fragmented verse. I was wondering how to reconcile difference—intrinsic differences.

Just do it. It's true your job is to give the illusion of organization or the authority of organization. How you go about it is what everyone has been wondering for five thousand years, or at least three thousand, or certainly since free verse came in. I only know how I try to do it, which is what I've been trying to explain. You can even put different tones of voice in as long as you stop and start again, as long as they seem "collagy." The problem, of course, with collage is that—and I guess, basically, that's what we're talking about, a collage effect—the collage has to come together to look like something other than merely collage. I think part of how you do that is in the strength of your line, the authority of the music in your line, the interest in your language, the apparent control that you have in moving from the first line to the last line, no matter how far out it bulges. I think your problem with form is unanswerable by me because I don't know an answer. It is the question I work with all the time. How do you get disparate things and try to mold them into a—not whole—but unified series of parts? I'm not particularly interested in a whole. To me, the sum of the parts is

always more interesting than the whole. It's how you keep the parts together and how you keep them from becoming a whole that fascinates me. As I said, I think all art tends to be circular, but I think the artist's job is to keep it from becoming circular and working in that synapse where it sparks before it comes together; that's where the action happens when you're writing poems, at least for me. That is what is so compelling to me about formal organization: to run it to an almost complete formality, to almost make a whole but keep it from being a whole, having the parts really be much more exciting than some seamless, completely organized story. That's why I say, your question is impossible for me to answer because I, basically, don't want to answer it. I want to work toward its answer all the time, but if I answer it, then all of the structural things I've been working on stop having any interest for me, and I have to go back and write the poems I did twenty years ago, and it's of no interest to me to go back and write "Reflections on the Second Day of Spring" or whatever poem I wrote here, in Iowa City, in 1962. It was important for me to write that then, but not now. The excitement about poetry is that there's always something out there that hasn't yet been discovered by you, and, what's really exciting, always something out there that hasn't been discovered by anyone yet. There's some form, there's some formal organization, there's some way of putting things together, that nobody's figured out yet. It's out there. Great big Platonic letters "HERE IT IS," and you have to try and chip it off. It's out there, and that's what you've got to look for.

You said you grew up in Tennessee, and judging from your poems, it sounds like you spent a lot of time in California.

Yes, seventeen years.

I'm curious about this rupturing of your sense of place—maybe there was, maybe there wasn't a problem. But making a move like that across a continent and then sort of resettling, was that a problem for you?

No, it actually wasn't a problem. The problem was coming back. While I was out there, I could write about back here the entire time.

But you wrote about California at the same time.

Yes, it would start there and come back. That's true, I did. But I spent a lot more time writing about Tennessee and North Carolina and Italy in California than I ever did, say, in Iowa City during my four years

here. And now that I've been back in Virginia for three years, I haven't written about the "past," as it were, to a great extent at all. It was only when I was completely away from it. So that turned out to be a good thing for me. Now, the bad thing will be when I start writing poems about California. I started writing, in Italy, at a very late age; I mean 23 or 24, a late age for a writer. Most people start writing at 15 or 16. So I was never around the country I grew up in when I started writing poems. I had no disruption. I was always in transit. If one thinks of where one grew up as one's home, then I was always away from there ever since I began writing, so there was never a disruption. I may have written out the past. No, that's not true; you never write out the past. It was never a problem for me because I was not grounded in my native land when I started out.

What happens when you think you might be able to write about California? What's going on? Just time? Just scene?

I don't know. Apparently, I have no emotional stake in California, and so I probably will not. I enjoyed being out there. I liked the ocean. I always tend to write about what's around me. Most of my stuff starts from something observed, something seen, as opposed to some people whose work—Mark Strand's for instance—starts in their heads. It really has nothing to do with what they see. And so it was out there. But I don't have the emotional stake in it, as some Californians obviously do. It's as good a place as any to be from. I just don't happen to be from there.

Do you consider yourself a Southern poet?

You betcha. I do very much. That was another reason, actually, I wanted to go back to the South. I don't want to be merely a Southern poet, but I certainly wanted to be one, and always thought of myself as one the whole time I was in California. You have to be from somewhere; that's where I'm from, and I like being from there. I also liked being away from there for about thirty years; I mean I hit the ground running. I was gone. And I'm of two minds about being back, but it is where I'm from. As Flannery O'Connor said about the Eucharist, "If it's just a symbol, to hell with it."

In talking about where you're from, you've been talking about reconstructing or reconstituting reality through, let's say, a nonlinear, associative line; that's how you're describing the journals you're working on. Would you use the same kind of terms . . . I mean what force does memory have in your work? Is memory

the same kind of work, the same kind of activity, a reconstituting or reconstructing of reality?

I think so.

Memory is something that surfaces a lot, and I'm just wondering what kind of a force you think of memory as being.

Well, it's been a driving force in my work, certainly. It's the most reconstructible and reconstitutable thing there is because it's always out of kilter when you put it down. I mean it's not ever quite what you think it was. That's part of its pleasures, to me, because you think you can be as accurate, as descriptively accurate, as possible, and, in fact, you're reconstituting just by the very act because you never quite remember the way it was. No matter how convinced you are, you're almost always wrong to some extent. Memory, after a while, is sometimes all you've got, and so it becomes a great, fertile piece of land to work, particularly if you are a Southerner and you tend to live in the past or were brought up by people who lived in the past. Therefore, it was something I did with ease if not abandon, and I did find it to be a very potent brew, for me. It didn't fire my imagination, but it certainly did tickle my fancy.

What happened to the pepper tree?

Yeah, that's sad. That was a great tree, but it was actually only a stand-in for a mimosa. Still, I liked it.

But are they separate?

They become the same. They tend to . . . They become the same door. You open one and you open them both. The pepper tree is both the subjective and the objective correlative, which is to say it is the thing which starts the other, but it also then blends with it and becomes some kind of subjective reality once the poem gets going or once the situation in the poem gets going. Without the pepper tree bringing back other occasions, there would be no other occasion. I mean, I don't think you could say, "Well, how about the palm tree?" or "How about the holly bush?" That's not the same thing. Something about this particular tree outside my window in California reminded me of where I grew up. So it became, in a strange way, the mimosa tree that was outside my window when I was a child. That they looked rather alike is probably not incidental. That's why I say it's both the

subjective and the objective correlative because it became—not only what started it—it became the continuing grease for the slide.

You speak about Italy letting you begin to write, but actually you have spoken about it being a combination of Italy and Ezra Pound. And at the time of the interview that was published in Field, you said that you had never taught Pound, and yet you had been teaching for ten years. Have you taught Pound?

I have now taught Pound. I spent the most intense ten weeks of my life teaching Pound back in 1981 or so. Not very well, but I did it, and it was fascinating for me. I say it was Italy and Pound because he was the first poet I ever read without being “assigned” a poet. I read him, and I thought it was terrific and—the Frost thing—it was the first time I realized you didn’t have to write like Frost. Even though I said I started when I was twenty-three and twenty-four, it was true that I had tried to write stories in college, and they were just terrible. I simply can’t tell a story. Pound was a way of seeing there were ways of writing other than straight narrative. Pound has been a great influence on my life, but I can imagine it having been someone else as well. It might have been—hell, I don’t know—it might have been H.D.; it might have been Eliot; it might have been Wallace Stevens; it might have been someone else I could have picked up at that time. I was ready to find something that would click. Obviously, picking up a poem and reading about a place I was sitting in that I thought gorgeous didn’t hurt. And then, to find out that his publisher was in that little town I lived in, Verona, and that I could go down and get these first editions of Pound in Verona. . . . I didn’t understand much of it, but it sounded good. Still don’t understand it very well, either. But it’s fabulous, absolutely fabulous work.

How did structure and form become important, as opposed to just going with the subject matter?

I’m not sure I begin to comprehend this. I may have manufactured it. It is the sort of thing that I am comfortable with, which is to say that I feel once you reach a certain point, all your content is serious. I feel mine is serious. We’re talking about serious things—serious people talking about serious things. Therefore, the way you go about approaching this is what’s workable and possible. Content you can’t do anything about. There it is. I mean, all forms basically are about the Six Things: life, death, love, the divine, etc., you know. Now, the subject matter, how you get to them, changes endlessly and variously. The way you put the subject matter together is fascinating to me

because I am a person who can do nothing with his hands. I cannot do anything. But one thing I found that I can do is tinker with poems. So naturally one talks a lot about what one thinks one can do as opposed to what one can't do. You know, I don't want to go around talking about how to build a house or something. And you tell yourself, "Well, that's not important. This is what is important." Structure is endlessly fascinating because structure is infinite. Form is finite, probably, but structure is infinite. It can go on expanding and expanding. If you could build a large enough spider web—if you could do it—you could hang it on this star, and you could hang it over there. And you could go on forever.

Therefore, the possibilities of putting things together are basically infinite, in the terms that we use infinite. You know, not with a capital "I," but there are a lot of them. If someone wants to spend all his time putting together poems, with all the hard work, and the sweat, and the frustration that it takes to write, about something dumb, that doesn't seem to me very interesting. Therefore, you write about serious things. I take that as a given in any person. So content, as I say, doesn't really concern me. I feel that my content will always be something. What does concern me is finding different ways to talk about it, rather than taking a walk or sitting on the back porch drinking Coors. That's subject matter, but that's not very interesting subject matter.

Is the structure, then, the only thing that is really unique to the poet and what the poet is addressing?

I don't think so, but it probably is for me. I can't say anything empirical about anybody else. It is the thing that to me is endlessly discoverable—or at least so far it's been endlessly discoverable. The attempt at Form, the whole *Cantos*, for instance, was the search for a final Form, an Ultimate Form. It's a failure, but what a great try! I believe it was found once, given the terms in which it was tried, and that was in *The Divine Comedy*, where the form, the structure, the story line, all the characters—the three Dantes—everything in there works. It really does come together, and people have been trying to imitate that for a long time, and it's very hard. He had a great advantage in that the medieval world was more circumscribed than the world is now, as far as what was possible and what wasn't possible. You couldn't write that poem now because people would think, "What? Are you kidding? St. John raised in the body? . . . Maybe, but we don't think so. . . ." For me, structure is where the rock hits the water.

You talked about use of line. Now, are there any other aspects of rhythm or music or technique that you use in the act of writing?

You mean how I put my lines together, or how I think I put my lines together? Well, I like to think I write in a kind of loose syllabics as opposed to, say, accentuals or something like that. I count all the syllables in every line that I write. I try to have them be odd numbers of syllables. I like to think I work in a kind of bastardized quantitative measure, which is to say, I'm more interested in the number and the duration and the weight of the syllables than I am in the stress count or stress patterns in the line. I'm very aware of the stress patterns when they start becoming obvious, and I try to move them around. But, in fact, my main concern is the pattern of vowels. And I listen to them constantly when I write. I used to be very conscious of the number of both stresses and syllables. I have come, now, to be much more interested only in the syllable count. The stresses tend to take care of themselves. If you're working with a thirteen-syllable line, you're going to have somewhere between four and seven stresses in a line, automatically unless you go "rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock, rock" until you hit thirteen. But basically the stresses will take care of themselves.

It is to me an extension, a variation, a going forth from "the sequence of the musical phrase" where Pound said you should be interested in the shape of the line, and it should move in the sequence of the musical phrase as opposed to the sequence of the metronome. In other words, what he meant by that was don't just write lines in pentameter. He was very interested in quantitative meters but didn't really write them, of course. The only person I know of who is writing in quantitative meters now, or has recently, is Donald Justice. There may be others—James Merrill may have. But Justice has written poems in quantitative meters: in traditional quantitative meters, Spenserian quantitative meters. It is almost impossible to do in English because each vowel is a long or a short. And we don't have it that way, really, in English metrics. So there has to be some kind of extension or loosening or variation of the meters. That's what has been interesting to me—to get some kind of conversational line that is imagistically packed. It's hard to do because you end up either imploding in the middle or overdoing it or getting so clotted that it doesn't move. And then, to get that with a conversational tone is even harder. So that's again this year-long poem I'm doing, trying to carry this image-freighted line on an ersatz quantitative base, keep it moving, keep it flowing without it falling apart into little two- and three- and four-stress lines.

One of the problems you tend to get into is an overuse of anapests, and that is a problem because it can start to go “sing-songy” on you. So you have to start putting in long groups—or groups of long vowel sounds—which end up sounding like spondees and things like that, and then you need something to slow it down and move it up and slow it down and move it up. It has to keep moving. It always has to be moving. As I said, I started the juxtaposition of phrases and lines, and the line is still the basis of free verse. Olson says it’s the syllable. Well, how can you argue with the syllable being the basis? I suppose you could argue that the half-syllable is the basis, but, okay, say he’s right. The syllable is the basis. Still one thinks in phrases and lines—I hope one thinks in phrases and lines. Once you start thinking in sentences and ideas, you’re not writing. Well, you’re working over towards prose, and, if you don’t mean to work over towards prose, you better be careful. Most of the great masters of the free verse line came to it through writing formal meters, formal verse. One of the things that it gave them, one of the real things it gave them, was the sense of a line as a unit, phrases and lines as units, because when you’re writing in traditional meter—be it pentameter, or tetrameter, or hexameter—you always have to come down to a line. It’s a line, and then there’s another line, and then there’s another line, and they go together to make sentences, of course; but if you don’t know this, if you don’t come to free verse that way, it seems to me you tend to write sort of blocky little sentence stanzas, and you worry about line breaks. If people would worry less about line breaks and more about lines, the breaks would take care of themselves. There are six or so basic kinds of free verse lines. There’s the Whitman line, which is self-contained. Most of them are sentences, but they’re all self-contained units. Then there’s a Pound line, which is the syntactical unit line. Then there’s a Williams line, which is asyntactical, cross-grain; it cuts at odd places, toward the direction of speech, as he said, towards the measure of speech. And then there are the Stevens and Eliot lines, which are much the same, except that Stevens’ is probably a bit more plastic, whereas Eliot’s is sort of expanded blank verse. Then there’s the Hemingway line, which is the prose-like line, currently so popular, the long prose-like line. I say it’s a Hemingway line just because he wrote such good prose. Somewhere in those free verse masters—Hemingway was not a free verse master—those six free verse lines, you’ll find an example of most of the free verse lines we write, that you write, that I write.

How did doing translations affect your writing?

It sure proved to me I didn't know Italian very well, for one thing. I translated two Italian poets because it's the only language I used to know a little of: Dino Campana, just recently, and Montale, Eugenio Montale, twenty years ago. They were the two—when I started writing in Italy back in 1959, 1960—they were the two Italian poets whose works I tried to read. And Montale was a real kind of a spiritual transfer for me, at least his book, *La Bufera (The Storm)*, was. I felt that if I could do that, I could write poems. If I could put them together and write that way about the concerns that I thought he had, I would be able to address some of my own. So I tried translating some in an attempt to understand the poems better, and then being an obsessive person, I did more and more. Then through various vicissitudes I was fortunate enough to be living in Italy on a Fulbright Grant and have a wonderful teacher at the University of Rome named Maria Sampoli. She helped me with these, as she was interested in Montale as well. Anyhow, I eventually translated the whole book. I don't think there's been any stylistic influence from Montale on my writing, but it's certainly helped me in my belief, unformed at the time, that poetry was the most serious thing in my life—and from then on, it has been—and that when you write, you take on a serious charge. I'll never be grateful enough to him for that. I didn't translate his poems well enough; I don't think anyone can in English. There's some kind of electricity. In a way, he's like Leopardi. It just doesn't come across in English the way it does in Italian. I translated Dino Campana as sort of paying back the second debt I had, because his spirit was very important to me when I first started writing. He's very romantic, kind of a De Nerval, Trakl, Rimbaud-like poet of the early part of this century. I like his spirit better than I like his poems. But I felt I owed him. I probably won't ever do any translating again because my Italian has just gone down to nothing, and it seems to me that it's not really fair, with ten years gone, to translate from a language you don't really know. My biggest influences have been Peter Matthiessen and W.S. Merwin. Again, not stylistically but from beliefs that they hold and, I think, hold very seriously.

Which are?

Well, they're practicing Zen Buddhists, which I am not. But what they're looking for is the same sort of thing I'm looking for. A small center of quiet and light at the center of the universe. Good luck. You know.

What do you mean by style?

Well, I don't know. I suppose style is the way—how you put it together, how you write, how you go about reproducing what's emotive or the emotional value you're trying to present. I don't know. Style. Surface style. Obviously we're getting into an area I'm very uncomfortable in because confusing style and substance is not a good thing, as we all know. But without a certain kind of individuality in your way of writing, which you get only through others, only after writing like everybody else for many years (you can't go out and get it down at the K-Mart, you have to go through and go through and go through), finally it will accrue to you. You shouldn't worry about it. After a while, your style will accrue; it will happen to you whether you believe it will or not. But I think it's important, after a while, to have your way of looking at things and putting things down—I mean on paper. E. B. White said style is the writer, and to a certain extent, I think, he is right. In the same way you can go down a hall in an art gallery and see a Cézanne or a Picasso or a Monet or a Rothko or a Frank Stella or a Mondrian, and just by looking at it you know who it is, I would like someone to read a poem of mine and say, "Oh, that's Charles Wright." It's not a bad thing in art, and I don't know why it necessarily has to be a bad thing in writing, although it has come to mean shallowness—all style, unconcerned with the more serious things. I don't think that has to be true. And it is true that I can't think of any poet who wasn't a great stylist, who didn't have an individual way of doing it. Peter Taylor and Elizabeth Bishop are two great examples of great stylists that don't seem to have any style at all, but they're great stylists just the same. Style is everything and nothing. Mostly it's everything. I like picking up "Song of Myself" and knowing it's "Song of Myself" or picking up Emily Dickinson and knowing it's Emily Dickinson and not Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

Could you generalize about how you end a poem?

Closure. Well, the one I'm working on now I will end on the thirty-first of December, or I will pretend to. Again, I think it does go back to that point of trying to come as close to becoming circular as possible, to give the illusion of circularity and completion, but keeping it from doing so exactly. Someone asked me, and we were talking in my workshop a couple of weeks ago, about how we always try to end poems on images. Why do we do that? Why can't we just end it subjectively or end it without completion? Of course you can, but you better make it fascinating, because it does seem to be more interesting to end a poem with a very strong image, a luminous image that then

will luminate back through the various parts and help light everything up. If you end it on a statement, you better have one as though it were squeezed out of the poem, as though from one of those cookie things, so that it's not just tacked on at the end. My forms are so odd now that I don't have any particular formula for any of them. I tend to try to end them referential to the beginning—somehow. You, as reader, might not see that reference. However, in my own mind, there is usually some reference back to the beginning of the poem to keep, as I say, that illusion of circularity. A poem should end in the strongest manner possible . . . with a strong image. If not, then the statement better be so good and such a wrap for the whole poem you don't question it. The most interesting, of course, is an imagistic statement. Every form is different. It does seem to be true that you can't generalize about how all poems should end. William Carlos Williams often used to end his poems ten lines from the bottom and then just sort of interestingly "tch, tch, tch, tch, tch" down the page. Some poems don't end at all. They just peter out.

How do you intend an ellipsis to be read? Why do you use them?

In the normal way. The words stop, but the thought goes on. I use them because I often think that what isn't said is stronger than what is. There are some things that shouldn't be written down. . . .