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Charles Wright On Style

The Zen master, Saiso, once wrote: “Before I began studying Zen, I saw mountains as mountains, rivers as rivers. When I learned some Zen, mountains ceased to be mountains, rivers to be rivers. But now, when I have understood Zen, I am in accord with myself and again I see mountains as mountains, rivers as rivers.”

Style is not everything. But it is the main thing. Mark Rothko went from being just another painter (in the 1930s and 40s when he still signed his paintings Markus Rothkowitz, his real name) to being Rothko, distinctive, unique and original, when his style changed, and he became as ambitious in his work as he was in his desires—trying to reach a place, probably, where pure style was pure meaning, where what you had to say became inseparable from how you said it.

Color grounds and color combinations, of course, equate with emotional values in painting in the same ways that rhythmical grounds and rhythmical combinations equate with emotional values in poetry. And if, as Ezra Pound once said, only emotion endures, then style will endure, since, as Proust reminds us, everything has been said, “but no one pays any attention, so it must be said again every day.” Thus style is indispensable in getting the world’s ear.

When Markus Rothkowitz changed his name and his style, he lessened the words and abstracted the subject matter. But not the meaning. That got clearer, and wider and deeper. The line he walked, however, between significance and decoration, became sharper and harder edged. The greater his ambition, the more impossible its realization. Eventually, his ambition became cosmic. Inexorably, he had to become the same way. It’s a hard choice when you feel you can’t do what you’ve driven yourself to have to do. Either way, you’ve got to stop. And so he stopped.

Charles Wright delivered this essay at a question and answer session at Grand Valley State University prior to his reading at Poetry Night.

Prose is written for the living, and poetry is written for the dead, and the dead, someone once said, only care about whether or not you write well, or if you can really paint. They don't care if you have won any prizes, or whether you have read the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard, or read at Purdue's Literary Awards ceremony. They only care if your work has formal value. We should listen to them.