Think of the final lines of great poems. "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." "I have wasted my life." Think of the way in which the poem brings us to that line.

Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream—  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily  
Life is but a dream.

A quatrain in ballad meter—alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter. The first line veers towards spondees, the second establishes the trochaic norm, the third breaks out in a string of dactyls, and the fourth line—the astonishing final line—returns us to the norm but with a difference. The thrill of that line lies in its unpredictability. We row our boat, row it again. We’re working, but the stream flows gently; so do we, the work of rowing merged with the sound of water flowing. And then—who could have known that our work and our pleasure would come to this?—life is a dream: the power of these words, no matter how familiar, emanates not so much from the words themselves, their rhythm, their meaning, as from the leap that has taken place between the third and final lines of the poem. It is the same surprise, the same leap, that distinguishes the end of James Wright’s "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota":

To my right,  
In a field of sunlight between two pines,  
The droppings of last year’s horses  
Blaze up into golden stones.  
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.  
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.  
I have wasted my life.
—or the end of Robert Frost’s “Directive”: “(I stole a goblet from the children’s playhouse.)/Here are your waters and your watering place./Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”

We often associate poetic disjunction—the leap from one semantic, discursive, or figurative plane to another—with modernism; we think of Rimbaud, of Ezra Pound. We often associate an even more aggressive mode of disjunction with postmodernism; we think of Ashbery, of Susan Howe. But disjunction has always been a crucial aspect of poetry. The thrill of the final two lines of “Western Wind,” one of the oldest poems in the English language, can best be described in much the same way that I’ve analyzed “Row, row, row your boat.”

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

The expostulation—Christ!—marks the turning point, the place where the poem breaks open, releasing an emotion that is both unpredictable and, at least in retrospect, logical. The poem could not be otherwise, yet it surprises us, and the surprise is permanent. How well Yeats knew this to be true—Yeats, who ended his life’s work with a calculatedly unassuming poem called “Politics.”

And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war’s alarms
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

How then, if disjunction isn’t to be thought of as uniquely modernist, did certain modern poets—Eliot more than Yeats, Pound more than Eliot—purchase this quality for themselves, lulling us into the illusion that Frost’s web of syntax and meaning is placidly discursive? A wholly satisfying answer to this question would need to serve many different constituencies, both aesthetic and social. But those constituencies would need to begin by noticing that even within a very circumscribed notion of modernism (call it Anglo-American High
Modernism—call it T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) disjunction takes different forms and has different effects. Here is the opening passage of "The Fire Sermon," the central movement of The Waste Land.

The river’s tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song.
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck
And on the king my father’s death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground
And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year.
But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring,
O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

The passage begins with what appears to be naturalistic description—the river, its banks. Still, we pay more attention to what is missing (bot-
tiles, sandwich papers, cigarette ends, nymphs, City directors) than to what is there. And at the same time, the logic of naturalistic description has begun to crumble, since the absence of sandwich papers has been equated with the absence of nymphs. The landscape seems simultaneously rural and urban, arcadian and modern, and the intrusion of the lovely refrain from Spenser’s “Prothalamion” (“Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song”), so unsuited to the urban landscape, does not seem merely ironic: rather, it makes us wonder if there is some unknown presence in this desiccated landscape, an undiscovered power in the verse to perceive it. The subsequent quotation from Marvell (which is itself disrupted by a second voice which gives us “The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear” instead of the expected “Time’s winged chariot hurrying near”) builds our sense of an uncanny presence to an extraordinary degree. The lines do not seem merely willful or irrational; rather, they are all the more frightening for appearing to suggest a hidden logic we have yet to fathom. The result is movement, abandon, suspense. By the second reference to Marvell, Eliot’s disjunctions run rampant, sweeping us from the rat’s foot to motor cars to Mrs. Porter and finally to the inexplicable epiphany of Verlaine’s children chanting in the dome.

We don’t stay there. Ultimately, we deduce the hidden logic (though our knowledge does little to reduce the uncanny power of Eliot’s poem, especially when we listen to it): Eliot’s manipulation of the grail myth at least partially unites these disjunctive voices, and once we know that the line from Verlaine’s sonnet describes Parsifal’s arrival at the grail castle, the logic seems clearer. Eliot’s disjunctions take us to different places at the same time, and we’re left feeling that we occupy different landscapes, different registers of consciousness at the same moment. Even more crucially, Eliot’s disjunctions are dramatic—the result of eccentric, overlapping voices. When the voice of “Prufrock” suddenly stops its gentle whining to intone “In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo”—or when the tired voice of “Gerontion” startles us with “In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,/To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk/Among whispers”—we have the sense of some logic other than the
speaker's personality determining the direction of the lines. The effect is as if we’d seen a ghost, or heard one, a double from another world. It is the feeling, writ large, that we have at the end of "Western Wind" or "Row, row, row your boat"; life is but a dream.

In contrast, consider the opening lines of the second of Pound’s cantos:

Hang it all, Robert Browning.
there can be but the one “Sordello.”
But Sordello, and my Sordello?
Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
So-shu churned in the sea.
Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,
Sleek head, daughter of Lir,
eyes of Picasso
Under the black fur-hood, lithe daughter of Ocean.

This poem contains, as does every poem Pound wrote, lines of exquisite beauty—“Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash”: long, image-freighted lines that now sound more like Charles Wright than Pound himself. But Pound’s so-called ideogrammatic method (the juxtaposition of discrete particulars) produces little of the uncanny power that Eliot’s disjunctions do. In Eliot there is always the shock produced by shifting from one mode of logic or discourse or image to another; in Pound the method is usually pedagogical rather than dramatic, a momentary puzzling over what Sordello could possibly have to do with So-shu churning in the sea.

I don’t mean to cleave Pound from Eliot absolutely; few poems are more thrillingly, movingly disjunctive than that two-line “In a Station of the Metro.” But rather than Eliot’s, Pound’s usual manner of disjunction has by and large determined our sense of what constitutes an authentically experimental style: Louis Zukofsky, Barbara Guest, Charles Bernstein. One could hardly choose three more different poets, but they share the presupposition that pathos is for other people, that a disjunctive style precludes—ought to preclude—the lure of feeling. A fear of sentiment—a confusion of sentiment with emo-
tion, with a speaking subject as such—drives and justifies the use of disjunction in late-twentieth-century American poetry. Or so it often seems. My point in distinguishing Eliot from Pound is to dismantle our association of disjunction with certain modernist or postmodernist sensibilities.

Let's call Eliot's mode wet and Pound's dry. Think of contemporary examples: Jorie Graham is wet, her disjunctions as dramatic as Eliot's and as evocative of human feelings—anxiety, loss, rage, fear.

I will vanish, others will come here, what is that, never never to lose the sensation of suddenly being completed in the wind—the first note of our quarrel—it was this night I believe or possibly the next filled with the sensation of being suddenly completed, I will vanish, others will come here, what is that now floating in the air before us with stars a test case that I saw clearly the impossibility of staying.

I'm not yet concerned with what these, the concluding lines of "Le Manteau de Pascal," mean. I want to register the way in which this compressed, disjunctive syntax evokes not so much a speaker as the act of speaking—a rivetingly engaged act of speaking. In contrast to Graham's manner, consider Rosemarie Waldrop's use of dry disjunction in the concluding lines of A Key into the Language of America.

here
the wind
will be tomorrow
a constant disquisition
into the secret of velocity
while men grow small
within their skin
tongue tied
into another language

Unlike Graham or Eliot, Waldrop is interested in language but not in the drama of speaking—as if our sense of the illusion of the unified
subject demanded that we no longer act as if we entertain that illusion. Human feeling is staved off by a disjunctive style that stakes its author-
ity on the constructedness of human feeling.

My argument is not with Waldrop, whose stern rejection of the bardic aspect of poetry—which Graham sometimes courts—has its own seductions. Equally attractive is her refusal to idealize her own stylistic choices. (She once remarked that she began writing collage poems in order to stop writing about her mother; she then discovered that the collage poems were also about her mother.) My point is register-
ed in the fact that Waldrop appears in the Norton anthology of post-
modern American poetry while Graham does not. Neither do Charles Wright or Thylias Moss, but these omissions are more explicable. Gra-
ham does not appear for the same reason that Eliot is rarely named as authentic precursor to postmodern poetry: disjunction has become wrongly synonymous with dry disjunction.

Part of the allure of dry disjunction is often staked on the impression that the poetry is performing serious work by disrupting normative discursive patterns; a didactic imperative replaces the distraction of pleasure. But if one mode of dry disjunction consequently seems a bit schoolmasterish, another mode can sound like the bad boy in the back of the classroom.

They ask me if I’ve ever thought
about the end of the world,
and I say, “Come in, come in,
let me give you some lunch, for God’s sake.”
After a few bites it’s the afterlife
they want to talk about. “Ouch,” I say,
“did you see that grape leaf skeletonizer?”
Then they’re talking about redemption
and the chosen few sitting right by His side.
“Doing what?” I ask. “Just sitting?”
I am surrounded by burned up zombies.

These are the opening lines of James Tate’s “A Knock on the Door.” Like most of Tate’s poems, this one begins in a commonplace situation
(the evangelists knocking at the front door) and then unfolds a narrative at once inevitable and improbable. While the collisions of different kinds of diction (the afterlife nestled together with the grape leaf skeletonizer) are often humorous, the humor is chummy: the joke hinges on the hope, as does most complex irony, that somebody else won't get it—that somebody will find the poem a little ridiculous. So while Tate's disjunctions do produce some effect in the reader, it is almost always the same effect—a feeling of chummy collusion. There is consequently little room for tonal variation in this poetry.

Tate's manner owes a great deal to Ashbery, who mastered the modes of dry disjunction early on and who occasionally returns to them in recent poems such as "Notes from the Air."

A yak is a prehistoric cabbage; of that, at least, we may be sure.
But tell us, sages of the solarium, why is that light
still hidden back there, among the house-plants and rubber sponges?

What distinguishes Ashbery from Tate, however, is that Ashbery is a master of both wet and dry disjunction. Not only does he move between these modes from poem to poem; he moves between these modes within a single poem, building a highly nuanced drama of diction and sensibility. As "Notes from the Air" continues, it reprimands itself: "No more trivia, please." Then the poem concludes with a burst of lyrical beauty that sounds almost Wordsworthian. Not only are each of these passages disjunctive, their diction and syntax just slightly at odds with each other; in addition, the modes of disjunction are themselves at odds with each other. Here is the end of the poem:

No more trivia, please, but music
in all the spheres leading up to where the master
wants to talk to you, place his mouth over yours,
withdraw that human fishhook from the crystalline flesh

where it was melting, give you back your clothes, penknife,
twine. And where shall we go when we leave? What tree is bigger
than night that surrounds us, is full of more things,
fewer paths for the eyes and fingers of frost for the mind,
fruits halved for our despairing instruction, winds
to suck us up? If only the boiler hadn’t exploded one
could summon them, icicles out of the rain, chairs enough
for everyone to be seated in time for the lesson to begin.

People who complain that all of Ashbery’s poems are pretty much
about the same thing—loss, longing, the passage of time—need to
admit that all lyric poems are pretty much about the same thing. Ash-
bery refuses to disguise this uniformity; he forces us to read a poem for
its manner rather than its matter (which is finally what we’re always
doing, even if we have the luxury not to acknowledge it). And once we
pay attention to the manner, we feel the impact of his virtuoso manipu-
lations of disjunction. “Notes from the Air” is an extremely moving
poem. Dear God, it says, give me back my childhood, my penknife, my
twine. As I die, let me remember that no world I’ve ever imagined, no
world beyond, could possibly be more beautiful than the world I’ve
lost—these trees, this sky. How does Ashbery get away with this? By
encasing these feelings in a highly nuanced sequence of different
modes of disjunction. More precisely, the poem’s sense of possibility,
loss, and thwarted recovery is registered in these very shifts between
modes. “Notes from the Air” concludes by reintroducing a hint of
chumminess (“If only the boiler hadn’t exploded”), as if to say that we
need now to return to trivia in order to entertain the poem’s fleeting
emotions.

To put it another way, the disjunctiveness of “Notes from the Air”
is ultimately dramatic. Ashbery’s range of diction is wider than Eliot’s,
but like Eliot’s or Graham’s, his poems feel spoken even if they lack an
easily identified speaker: their disjunctive manner does not preclude
the fiction of the human subject, however intricately constructed the
manner might suggest that fiction to be. This is why Ashbery’s poems,
no matter how obscure, no matter how aligned with what we think of
as the dryer responsibilities of avant-garde poetry, are always ripe with
pathos. Life is but a dream.

I’ve been concentrating so far on the extrinsic qualities of dis-
junction—on the effect produced in a reader. Linked to these modes
are intrinsic qualities—technical means by which the modes of disjunction work in themselves. Dry disjunction thrives on omission, on lacunae, on the strategic impression that something has been left out. In contrast, wet disjunction gives us the impression that everything and more has been included in the capacious texture of the poem. If we ultimately feel that something is missing it is because we have been led to believe that the poem could include far more—not ever less—than it already says.

In the poetry of John Koethe (perhaps the only poet both heavily influenced by Ashbery and utterly distinguishable from him) this effect is maintained through the conjunction of normative syntax and wayward argument. Since The Double Dream of Spring Ashbery has often worked in this mode as well—offering us poems that sound as if they ought to make logical sense but never quite do. Koethe’s range is narrower (he never indulges in dry disjunction), but by risking an astonishing continuity of tone he pushes the method further than Ashbery ever does. The tone is wistful—even brazenly sentimental; it is indebted as much to late Jarrell as to Ashbery himself.

I feel like someone living in a fable
Of his own construction, waiting in some bleak, completely
Isolated country with no hope or history, where the minutes
Come and go and memories displace each other, leaving nothing
For the soul to do but feel them as they flow, and flow away.

These lines from “The Constructor” describe simultaneously a state of mind and the movement of the poem. The moments slide past us, taking everything with them: all disparity, all surprise is embraced by an endlessly unfolding syntax. And if the sheer proliferation of Koethe’s poems suggests that he might be dangerously content to live in a world of unmodulated feeling, an unavoidable aspect of the feeling is discontent. “You want there to be something more than just their tedious/Realities of disillusionment,” says Koethe, “I want to feel things burst again.” To entertain the illusion that there is “something more,” the poem itself must burst. Just when Koethe admits that all he
can do is construct "long, erotic sentences expressing/an unfocused state of sadness," something unpredictable happens.

There was this chorus of strange vapors, with a name
Something like mine, and someone trying to get free.
You start to see things almost mythically, in tropes
And figurations taken from the languages of art — to
See your soul as sliding out of chaos, changeable,
Twice blessed with vagueness and a heart, the feelings
Cumbersome and unrefined, the mood a truly human one
Of absolute bewilderment; and floating up from that
To an inanimate sublime, as though some angel said
Come with me, and you woke into a featureless and
Foolish paradise your life had gradually become.

This passage is the climax of a poem that seems, as it unfolds, to dismantle the possibility of climax. Koethe retains the placid, determined syntax (there is no illusion here of breaking out of normative structure) but the shift in diction and argument is breathtaking — all the more breathtaking because the syntax helps to occlude the fact that with the phrase "chorus of strange vapors" we have entered a radically new linguistic realm. If Koethe is certain that all we can do is live in a fable of our own construction, he is also certain that this realization gets us nowhere. It does not prevent us — thank goodness — from being swept up in illusions. It does not prevent us from requiring the odd, unpredictable beauties of disjunction — the wish that something might disrupt the endless continuity of our lives. The soul sliding out of chaos. A mood of absolute bewilderment. An angel whispering Come with me. Who would have thought that “The Constructor,” one of the most relentlessly disillusioned poems ever written, could conclude by finding solace in such beautiful, time-honored nonsense?

Every sentence in a good poem or in serious prose is a kind of experiment. It is begun without certainty as to where or how it will end; it is released to the world without any assurance as to the response it will, fairly or unfairly, elicit. The sentences in a poem are obviously premeditated in ways that our speech can never be. But
great sentences in great poems feel as shocking as the sentence that, once uttered, elicits the laughter or the derision we never expected. Some sentences advertise their astonishing disjunctiveness more obviously than others. Derek Walcott: "At the end of this sentence, rain will begin." Who could have known? Charles Wright: "A turkey buzzard logs on to the late evening sky." Gertrude Stein: "A sentence is this." Wordsworth:

Ye Powers of earth! ye Genii of the springs!
And ye that have your voices in the clouds
And ye that are Familiars of the lakes
And of the standing pools, I may not think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry, when ye through many a year
Thus by the agency of boyish sports
On caves and trees, upon the wood and hills,
Impressed upon all forms the characters
Of danger or desire, and thus did make
The surface of the universal earth
With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,
Work like a sea.

Everything about this sentence—the parataxis, the parallel syntax, the rolling pentameters, the proliferation of abstract nouns—is working to prepare us for the jump to figurative language in the last four words: "Work like a sea." Most simply, this figure itself works to blend the feelings denoted by those abstract nouns: hope with fear, hope and fear together with delight. Beginning with an inverted foot (a trochee rather than the expected iamb), the figure pulls us into a different landscape, both literally and metaphorically, and by doing so it makes even more subtly the point of John Koethe's "Constructor": we cannot live in a world without illusion—which is to say that we cannot tolerate a poem without disjunction. In lines immediately preceding those I've just quoted from the middle of the "Two-part Prelude," Wordsworth describes how stopping short on ice skates once provided the illusion that the world wheeled past him—a sense that the world
was animated by inexplicable powers. "I stood and watched," he says, "Till all was tranquil as a summer sea." Wordsworth then addresses the powers he himself has imagined ("Ye Powers of earth! ye Genii of the springs!") and with the final simile ("Work like a sea") returns us to the ordinary world that prompted the illusion. More uncanny, more shocking than the orotund address to unseen powers is that final simile: it lifts us to another world but also returns us to a world we've never left behind. Then the poem moves on.

*I have wasted my life. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.* I began my argument by focusing on the endings of poems — on the ways in which a leap from one figurative or semantic plane to another helps to conclude the poem with a feeling of unpredictable release. It is ultimately more important to see how disjunction is as crucial to the unfolding middles of poems as to their endings. Disjunction is not the showstopper, the means to the end; it is an inevitable part of the ongoing process of the poem. The final line of "Directive" thrills us because the entire movement of Frost's poem feels simultaneously controlled and wild — determined and unpredictable. The rhetoric of the poem is itself directive: although the "I" enters only at the end, we feel at every second a voice commanding us to move forward along a path — both literal and metaphorical — whose every contour has already been discovered. The language of the poem consequently feels reassuring at the same time that it feels creepy. For while the poem moves forward on logical rails, its cargo is inexplicable. While each sentence unfolds from the one before it with the rhetorical inevitability of directions, the sentences are semantically disjunctive, and each new phrase pulls us into an unexpected and often inexplicable landscape of feeling.

Make yourself up a cheering song of how  
Someone's road home from work this once was,  
Who may be just ahead of you on foot  
Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.  
The height of the adventure is the height  
Of country where two village cultures faded  
Into each other. Both of them are lost.
And if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home. The only field
Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.
First there's the children's house of make-believe,
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
Weep for what little things could make them glad.

Unlike Eliot, Frost wants to keep his contrapuntion in the air: the
commands ("Make yourself up," "make yourself at home," "Weep for
what little things") establish a continuity that lures us forward. But
within Frost's normative syntax, the poem veers as suddenly from
scene to scene, from metaphor to metaphor, as does the opening pas-
sage from "The Fire Sermon." We're walking down a road. We make
up a story about the previous walkers. The height of the adventure
(ours? theirs?) is a place where two villages faded away. The fact that
the villages are lost leads to the idea that we ourselves need to be lost,
but what is the reason for the need? How do we make ourselves at
home in such a condition? And why is the world we've discovered
(imagined?) shrinking—no bigger than a harness gall? Is the house
still standing, and if so, is it a house of make-believe because we've
imagined it or because it is truly a playhouse? Like Eliot's, these lines
do not seem merely willful or irrational; rather, they are all the more
frightening for appearing to suggest a hidden logic we have yet to fath-
om. The crucial difference is that Frost, unlike Eliot, does provide a
logical structure of meaning within which this sequence of disjunc-
tions unfolds. If anything, that makes the poem feel more uncanny:
reading Eliot, we feel an unknown presence directing our inexplicable
experience of the poem; reading Frost, we feel in addition a known
presence directing our experience of the poem. Life is but a dream.

One could paraphrase the final line of "Row, row, your boat" this
way: poetry is disjunctive. Wordsworth and Ashbery. "Western
Wind" and Jorie Graham. A poem unempowered by disjunction would
be intolerable—as intolerable as a life without change, without dis-
covery or surprise. Once wet disjunction has been differentiated from dry, once we see that powerfully disjunctive movement takes place within (not in spite of) normative syntax, then we are liberated to feel the shock of Wordsworth or Frost as liberally as we feel the shock of Eliot or Ashbery. I suspect that we are also liberated to ask if the poetry of dry disjunction is somewhat less shocking than it wants to be, despite its purchase on certain notions of what constitutes a postmodern poetic practice.

When W. H. Auden wrote the introduction for Some Trees, he rightly placed Ashbery in line with Rimbaud. In order to be true to the nature of “subjective life,” said Auden, these poets “must accept strange juxtapositions of imagery, singular associations of ideas.” The danger, as Auden admitted more openly in a letter to Frank O’Hara, was that of “confusing authentic nonlogical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue.” Wonder is precisely what Eliot’s disjunctions evoke. Pound’s disjunctions are often lacking in wonder because he wants first and foremost to instruct, forgetting that wonder is the seedbed of all learning. Eliot’s great achievement is to have found a place for deep human feeling within a highly disjunctive, experimental style. Which is to say, once again, that The Waste Land gives us the pleasure we feel reading “Western Wind,” “Directive,” or “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota.”

Auden sounds sure of himself, but how is an “authentic” form of nonlogical relation to be distinguished from an “accidental” one? There is always a risk involved in disjunction—that’s part of its appeal. And we need to feel, in our pleasure, the threat of the accident impinging slightly on the authentic. Still, some poems—however wildly disjunctive—ask to be trusted. Listen to Charles Wright.

If we were to walk for a hundred years, we could never take
One step toward heaven—
you have to wait to be gathered.
Two cardinals, two blood clots,  
Cast loose in the cold, invisible arteries of the air.  
If they ever stop, the sky will stop.  

Affliction’s a gift, Simone Weil thought—  
The world becomes more abundant in severest light.  

April, old courtesan, high-styler of months, dampen our mouths.  
The dense moist and cold and dark come together here.  
The soul is air, and it maintains us.

Throughout *Appalachia*, the book from which I quoted these lines, Wright builds his poems out of strictly closed stanzas: in this poem, “Stray Paragraphs in April, Year of the Rat,” he alternates two- and three-line stanzas which are always syntactically closed but which may be broken internally. What determines the order of these stanzas? Each seems so discrete, so self-reliant, that its connections to other stanzas become increasingly tenuous as the poem moves forward. And finally, in the last stanza, Wright separates the three lines from each other—as if the principle of disjunction that determined the movement from stanza to stanza has now invaded the space of the stanza itself: each line, each sentence, seems like its own metaphorical universe.

Yet the poem feels—despite its title—like anything but a collection of stray paragraphs. The nonlogical relations feel authentic not because of the poem’s meaning but because the tone of the poem—conveyed through its music—is so seductive, so palpably clear. Wright has often admitted that he counts every syllable and every stress in every line, and at the end of “Stray Paragraphs” we have a line of fifteen syllables followed by one of twelve, then one of nine; a line of eight stresses followed by one of five, then one of three. That first line veers towards spondees but feels generally dactylic: “old courtesan”—“high-styler of”—“months, dampen our.” The second line begins by
extending that spondaic pattern ("dense moist") but then becomes more placidly iambic. So at the same time that the lines are diminishing in length, they are also growing quieter, slower: "The soul is air, and it maintains us." In addition, the three lines are bound together by an intricate pattern of phonemic echo—consonants (months, mouths, moist) and vowels (old, cold, soul). We trust the poem because it wants to be listened to—spoken, savored in the mouth—before it is understood. The sound invites us. Welcomes us into the poem. Makes us feel, by implication, that we will be listened to in return.

I said earlier that dry disjunction tends to work by excluding things, wet disjunction by including. Dry disjunction tends also to exclude—to distrust—aural pleasure. By offering the gift of pleasure, in contrast, wet disjunction more effectively includes the reader. I don't mean to draw inviolable distinctions here; Charles Wright has learned a great deal not only from Stevens, a great master of disjunction, wet or dry, but perhaps more from Pound. But to do so, he had to separate the stern, schoolmasterish Pound from the poet who could not often enough admit that he himself was seduced by the beauty of language. Poems by Wright—or Eliot or Koethe or Graham—rarely make us feel that human feeling is for other people. That a craving for explanation—however right we are to resist it—is merely for other people. That pleasure inhibits rather than enhances—makes possible—the social or intellectual work of the poem. We row our boat, row it again. We're working, but the stream flows gently; so do we, the work of rowing merged with the sound of water flowing.