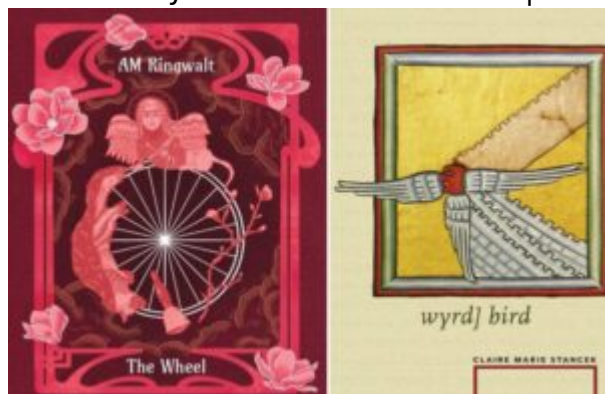


# [Make of this Language a Shrine: A Review of \*The Wheel\* and \*wyrd\] bird\*](#)

written by Guest Contributor | October 5, 2021



*The Wheel* by AM Ringwalt  
[Spuyten Duyvil](#), January 2021  
[B&N](#) / [Powell's](#)  
124 pages

*wyrd] bird* by Claire Marie Stancek  
[Omnidawn](#), November 2020  
[Bookshop](#) / [B&N](#) / [Amazon](#)  
88 pages

I've never had a vision. I've always wanted one. At ten, circled around the campfire, up the hill from the scummy lake, at Bible camp, watching sparks up into the night and my whole chest open to the possibility of holy fire. At fourteen, high summer, driving cross country while the wheels of my father's minivan spun gummy on the asphalt; at twenty, laying out under the stars, wanting to be a poet, waiting for language, for flame. Oh, I was ready. I have been ready. But the visions never came.

Two new hybrid works of poetry and memoir exist at this intersection of language and vision, or, more precisely, the longing for a vision. AM Ringwalt's *The Wheel* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2021) and Claire Marie Stancek's *wyrd] bird* (Omnidawn, 2020) are books devoted to literary predecessors who have left behind strategies for achieving mystical states of being: repetition, fracture, incantation. Their devotion suggests that perhaps one of the errors of my own youthful yearnings was the lack of text to guide me, the lack of company to show me a way forward, or to give me language to use to get there.

But Ringwalt and Stancek never fully achieve visionary states in their books, setting them apart from works like Lucille Clifton's *Mercy* (2004), which includes poems drawing from automatic writing Clifton completed while receiving messages from metaphysical beings she calls "The Ones," or Ariana Reines's *A Sand Book* (2020), which concludes with an astral experience Reines underwent on a street in New York City.

Instead, *The Wheel* and *wyrd] bird* make shrines out of their language, creating vision-spaces in text through a practice of lyric citation. Ringwalt's bibliography includes twentieth century mystics Simone Weil and Anne Carson, and Stancek's book is, among other things, an extended meditation on the twelfth century visionary Hildegard of Bingen. Both women also hold tightly to Biblical feminist icons—Mary for Ringwalt, Eve for Stancek—talismans of a spiritual potential through which, in Stancek's terms, language "might keep possible a possible world."

The state of longing these poets occupy is not a sign of linguistic failure or a lack of invention, but a suggestion of these poets' commitment to an essentially relational poetics; that is, a poetics which is invested in language which only makes sense in the company of others, which is disinvested in the power of the individual lyric speaker, and fully committed to being in relationship to other people. Stancek and Ringwalt are not solitary figures, rather, they are entangled in the world, and a chorus of voices speak to and through them.

These are not the typical conditions for achieving a visionary state. Especially for Christian mystics, communion with God requires a retreat from the world toward a state of self-nullification, into what feminist theologian Wonhee Anne Joh calls "a privatized sense of no-self that nevertheless is still rooted in the individual self." Ringwalt calls this space "syncope," borrowing the term from French philosopher Catherine Clément, and it is for her both a site of terrifying potential, and a place to avoid: to enter syncope is to disassociate, to let traumatic memory unmoor her from the world. Her poem, "Via Negativa," describes this state in the wake of Ringwalt's PTSD diagnosis:

Sound the 0,  
mouth-hollow  
echo  
past self  
Rose-  
blood  
tongue  
I faint  
into negative space  
neither forward  
back  
nor

What Ringwalt calls "syncope," Stancek refers to as "reverie," a breaking

away from the world motivated by grief, a kind of depressive never-ending sleep state. For both poets, the retreat of “syncope” or “reverie” is meant to protect, whether from trauma or grief, but its cost is high. In Ringwalt’s poem, above, the nullification sticks the poet in time, unable to move “forward // nor back.” There is nothing to learn in this state of remove, Stancek tells us, as she struggles to stay awake: “Hildegard’s visions come to her while she is in a waking state, not a trance.”

Despite their interest in mysticism and its states of trance, both Stancek and Ringwalt refuse to retreat fully into the individual self. Instead, they treat their texts as sites to contain, reflect on, and honor relationships that are experienced in full, embodied awareness. Stancek writes: “The word conversation comes from the Latin *com* ‘with, together,’ and *versare*, ‘to turn,’ and means ‘to turn around together.’” and Ringwalt: “My writing is my body of relation.” Reading these two books together is itself a kind of conversation, the turning of two people leaning together.

Both of these books make sense of themselves in company. Ringwalt’s *The Wheel* is, on one level, an autotheory breakup book. However, unlike Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*, *The Wheel* chronicles Ringwalt’s dis- and re-connection with her boyfriend (now husband), Will, a relationship rendered in a startlingly vulnerable level of detail, and whose reconciliation provides the book’s sense of closure. Ringwalt’s text is largely rendered in prose, as she moves us through a series of social scenes: exploring with her cousin at their family lakehouse in Northern Michigan, doing landscaping with a cohort of artists at a retreat in upstate New York, reading tarot with a friend at her grandparent’s house in California, traveling to Rome to study tarot and experimental poetry, accompanied by a friend from high school.

Stancek’s *wyrd] bird* is more elusive, and more experimental, occurring at the edge of sleep and waking in the aftermath of an unnamed personal loss. The book opens: “I slept with my book open, woke into strange thoughts pen in hand.” The “book” Stancek refers to here are the divine works of Hildegard of Bingen, a German ecclesiastic nun who experienced divine visions, composed music, and wrote extensive, lyrical devotional accounts of her visions, which included visual depictions that she would begin in-trance and complete after she had returned to her body. At times, Stancek’s composition seems borne out of this space of sleeping while waking, the half-trance of near sleep. Words merge together and drift to the page’s right margin, sliding into a kind of medieval script, with none of the standardized spacing we’ve come to expect in modern written text:

Intoth  
esameWh  
enhear  
ingisnotthat?  
tumblingoff

greena

bstractedbutalso

passivity0inmeinmein

This is the text written “after sleep arrived in the limbs, if not the brain, written over all the words that have come before, all the words now jumbled.” The words “that have come before” in this description are both Stancek’s own, merging into one another in her dream notebook, but also the words of Hildegard of Bingen, whose language always precedes and succeeds her.

These two books are also pain songs, long and lyric grapplings with sorrow. In *The Wheel* these sorrows—sexual violence, familial loss, romantic dissolution, the threat of aging—can move by with a speed that makes it occasionally difficult to linger. The wheel whirs on its axis, the reader must hold on to remain in its orbit. But sometimes the connections are incredibly subtle and fine-tuned, like the turn of a gear in an intricate clockwork: a friend’s tarot reading becomes the impetus for Ringwalt’s trip to Rome, becomes the context within which she interprets the meaningful accidents of life, to which she remains vigilantly attentive: “Now, as I write, I wonder, charged by the card: what does it mean to ‘allow things to evolve as they should’? ... Now as I write, I wonder: can I be ambivalent and vigilant at once?”

Stancek’s text is also predicated on a relational loss. There’s some suggestion this loss may be a miscarriage, or a breakup, or the death of a friend, the particulars are not ours to know. Yet the loss compounds, and may also include the loss felt by the believer who longs for God but receives only the absence of divine presence. Absence is ever present in Stancek’s pain, in contract to Hildegard of Bingen, for whom the pain of what modern scholars believe to be a migraine blooming meant she knew God was near. When Stancek feels pain it is the pain of something missing: “For each of the three days before you died, the only entry in your notebook was the same single word, in capital letters: PAIN.”

Interpretation is another possible form these books might have taken, as both Stancek and Ringwalt are trained in literary criticism. It is here I should offer that I attended the University of Notre Dame at the same time that Ringwalt was earning her degree; in one class, we studied modern poetry and theology together. Stancek, too, is trained as a critic, holding a PhD in English literature from UC Berkeley. But neither poet is interested in using her training, or her knowledge of these source texts, for what might be the expected, academic purpose, though there’s no question that they could.

In one moment, analyzing the concept of divination in a Christian hymn, Ringwalt writes that she could “notate—with em-dashes as symbols—every pause John Jacob Niles falls into during [the hymn “I Wonder as I Wander”].” Stancek’s text includes discursive meditations on the architecture of Catholic churches in Europe, and a grammatical analysis of a passage from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But this kind of academic analysis is inadequate to

the lived experience these poets are after. Citation, of Milton or Niles, of Simone Weil or Hildegard, is not done with a critical purpose, but a mystical one. Ringwalt continues: "Where does he [Niles] go in these breaths? These are moments of divination, a human plea-as-praxis for supernatural future-telling."

It's very likely these two books will be considered mystic in their own right (Janaka Stucky's blurb for Ringwalt's book calls it "a work of divination in the truest sense"), but it's important to mark out the ways in which they build for themselves shrines in other people's language, the way they construct for themselves safe places in which to converse.

I will admit there are moments when these shrines feel too safe, the walls too close: I get this sense most strongly when these poets gesture out (from a distance): Stancek at the end of her book repeating the line "I saw the cops in riot gear"; Ringwalt at the beginning of hers; with a question opened about the ethics of consuming cheap icons of Mary ("What mega-Christian corporation benefited from my buying a \$5 picture of Mary in Chinatown in Boston?"), but never returned to or closed, even as she flies to Rome, or retreats to family properties.

But I am asking for, perhaps, too much for two books focused on the ritual of healing that visionary poetry can offer. Their claims, in the end, are modest. *The Wheel* turns around the repeated phrase "I only want to fill this space with," a line which appears almost invariably at the top of an otherwise open page, a long breath in the book's emotional and spiritual density. "I only want to fill this space with white rock, clear rock, quartz rock, a clearing" Ringwalt writes, the repeating sentence filling the page even as it clears space for the ritual of stone. But the construction of the repeated phrase, with the verb "want" expressing an unfulfilled desire, and the moderating adverb "only," acts as an expression of modesty and excess, humility meeting its equal in abundance. When Ringwalt writes "The symbols were always for healing," I hear Stancek reply, "Let us have forever, suspended...in grammatical possibility."

And so, I'll imagine Ringwalt and Stancek, in a shrine like the one women built for Athena, clothed in gold robes, constructing intricate offerings, and singing, singing, singing.

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