I. Apostasy and Youthful Invention

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private
heart is true for all men—that is genius.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
“Self-Reliance”

Rooted in the ethos of the American Protestant middle class, Burchfield reflected strong, non-elitist values in his private life and in his art subjects. Preceding generations of his family shaped his religious and philosophical beliefs. The etymology of Burchfield’s name suggests his identity and vocation: Charles, his father’s middle name, refers to the leadership of European kings; Ephraim, which can be traced to his maternal grandfather and uncle, is the Hebrew name for fruitful and is associated with the leader of one of twelve non-conformist, warring, but later united tribes of ancient Israel; and Burchfield is a variation on Birchfield, a surname for inhabitants of a grove of birches, not ironically one of Burchfield’s favorite trees. Therefore, the name Charles Ephraim Burchfield foreshadows mastery, productivity, a rapport with nature, and turbulent shifts in spiritual beliefs, which for him began with the rejection of his family’s Protestant religion.

Burchfield’s paternal grandfather, James Reade Burchfield (1834-1896), was a clothing merchant in Crawford County, Pennsylvania who later became a Methodist evangelist minister in Ashtabula, Ohio. His ardent preaching alienated his son, William Charles Burchfield (1860-1898), who was also a merchant in Ashatabula. Friction between his father and grandfather led to Charles Ephraim Burchfield’s (1893-1967) own religious skepticism. He conjectured that his father’s rejection of orthodox religion may have contributed to his own professed distrust of dogmabound, organized religions which lasted for nearly fifty years. In 1931, at the age of thirty-seven, Burchfield outlined his disbelief in a lengthy letter to his wife’s Lutheran pastor, Reverend Martin Walker, in an attempt to thwart the minister’s persuasive invocations to join his church:

You will say to yourself “There are none so blind as those who refuse to see” — and you will be right. My inability “to see” arises directly from my innate desire “not to see.” I literally abhor the thoughts of becoming an orthodox Christian. I have sometimes wondered if my distaste for religious practices & forms is philogenetic [sic]. My grandfather was a Methodist evangelist minister, as popular in a certain section as Billy Sunday is today. . . . There was something admirable about his sincerity, if he was perhaps too zealous. . . . I never knew him, but I’ve often wondered if I didn’t inherit my strong distaste for orthodox religion indirectly from him thru my father, who naturally turned bitterly against it, having it crammed down his throat daily. I never knew my father either, so it would have to be as I said before “in the blood” . . .

It is ironic that Burchfield chose the metaphor of blindness to discuss religion. Of all people, this accomplished artist possessed an inner sight that guided his creative genius in painting spiritually rich interpretations of nature and the world around him.

The sudden death of Burchfield’s father, William, at the age of thirty-eight, may have had more impact on his son than his ideological rejection of religion. The second youngest in a family of six children, Charles was only five years old when his father died. Although the loss of one’s father is a traumatic event for any child, according to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Burchfield’s journals lack direct com-
mentary about the event. One can only speculate how his father's death affected Burchfield's development and whether it is likely that his solitary, often melancholic nature was established as an outgrowth of mourning. Instead of turning to religion for consolation or inspiration, Burchfield chose his own route, nevertheless faithful to the metaphysical power he experienced alone in the wooded landscapes where he made daily forays: "So I go to Nature when I want sincerity. In nature we not only find sincerity but also innocence. And when on all sides I am beset with palaver and artifice, I feel the need of drawing a long breath, I ramble the fields."  

The choice of an aesthetic career was clear to Burchfield from an early age. He was an elegant spokesman, whether he used images or words to convey his awe of nature. His writing is often poetic, an outpouring of compassionate thoughts without regard for grammatically correct sentences, but only for the emotional content of the moment or the jotting down of ideas for later consideration in his painting. There are few artists who have left such a vast legacy as Burchfield. He created more than two thousand paintings, drawings, and prints; and left extensive records: more than seventy volumes of journals kept from the ages of sixteen to seventy-three; indexes of his paintings, drawings, and prints which were often illustrated with black and white photographs; ample correspondence; and other important documents. When he was twenty-one and a student at the Cleveland School of Art, Burchfield debated his proper vocation:

And that brings me to my ever present dilemma: which do I love more - painting or writing? 

At school this winter, more or less shut indoors by the weather, painting seemed to be my highest form of expression, and yet - with the first call of a red-bird came the first doubt. His notes were as vital to me as the most subtle coloring in the sky; the manner in which he trilled or repeated his refrain as vital as the most rhythmical design, and if a painter, how to record it? I might paint a setting for him identical with the season of the year when I would first hear him and paint him perched on a branch with his head lifted and throat swelled and title it 'The Song of the Cardinal.' But would it be? . . .

Today while on a trip I listened long to a rose-breasted gros-beak singing his song. And the thoughts it inspired were not ones that could be put on canvas in colors. No, they alone can be expressed in words.

What then can be the answer? Can it be both? I can see no other out. One alone is a hard enough road; what then will the two combined mean? I confided to Alice Bailey this spring that I was going to write books about nature and illustrate them myself. Already in my mind I have made the following resolution, but I will now put it down on paper: I hereby dedicate my life and soul to the study and love of nature, with the purpose to bring it before the mass of uninterested public, that they may see and become familiar with the endless number of nature's beauties, wherein lies my greatest happiness. If I can bring only a few serious-minded people to see how vital nature is, besides being beautiful, I shall be content.  

Burchfield's lifelong motivation was the desire to communicate the beauty and vitality of nature to those who have ignored it or forgotten how to see it.

As an art student, Burchfield made careful observations of nature and reproduced his subjects with fidelity to outline, shape, color, and mass. His youthful sketches and drawings with watercolor washes resemble botanist's studies. This quasi-scientific approach was well-established in the Renaissance in nature studies, such as Albrecht Durer's gouache painting, Tuft of Cowslips, 1526, or Leonardo da Vinci's Study of a Tree, circa 1498. The latter contains text that comments on the fall of light and shadow on different boughs, not unlike notations that appear on a great
number of Burchfield’s drawings. The empirical study of flowers and plants by artists was prevalent in the nineteenth century and “persisted longer in America than abroad.” Burchfield was a prolific draughtsman who followed this tradition all his life. Plant drawings, such as Acanthus by Thomas Cole (1801-48) or Linaria vulgaris (toad flax) by Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823-1900)5 are strikingly similar to nature studies made by Burchfield, such as his conté crayon drawing of Trinita and Spider, 1961.6 Sinuous lines define the profile and suggest the mass of each plant, providing sufficient detail to distinguish the plant’s particular characteristics without being heavy-handed. Notations for future reference describe color and other pertinent data. A text written by Burchfield in 1965 for the introduction to The Drawings of Charles Burchfield, published in 1968, describes various categories of his drawings, ranging from doodles to studies, or “idea notes” to independent works. He began by stating, “One of the greatest joys of an artist’s working life is producing drawings. . . . For painting a picture is not an experience of unalloyed joy.”7

The subjects of Burchfield’s early works, particularly the drawings and watercolors he produced during his years at the Cleveland School of Art from 1912 to 1916, originally were based on direct observation of nature, but eventually evolved into more stylized and symbolic representations. John Ruskin, whose extensive writings were a great influence on American landscape painters, preached the employment of empirical accuracy in recording observations of nature, tempered by a pursuit of the ideal. Ruskin and his followers believed only painstakingly accurate detail in the representation of nature’s minutiae could respectfully acknowledge the existence of a benevolent, overseeing God. In Modern Painters III (1856), Ruskin wrote: “the simplest forms of nature are strangely animated by the sense of the Divine presence; the trees and flowers seem all, in a sort, children of God.”8

From medieval time, flowers, trees, and plants have assumed symbolic meanings, such as the lily for purity or the thistle for earthly sorrow and sin.9 Bouquets, whether presented or painted, became complex coded messages during the nineteenth century; but this language is nearly lost today. Unlike his contemporaries Edward Hopper and Reginald Marsh, who represented life’s pathos and vitality through human figures, Burchfield chose to represent human experience through allegorical associations with plants, flowers, and trees.

One of Burchfield’s recurring subjects was the tree. Among its many references, it is either a symbol of life (when in bloom or full leaf) or of death (when withered and barren).10 Its upright stance and organic flexibility make it figurative by association. Nannette V. Maciejunes has investigated the empathetic rapport with trees and woods felt by Charles Burchfield and John Marin. She brought to attention the fact that both watercolor artists “flirted with pure abstraction—coming at times perilously close—[however] neither would ever break with nature.”11

When Burchfield painted Ailanthus Branch in Winter in 1946 (pl. 2), it is likely that he knew the ailanthus was known popularly as the “tree of heaven” because he was an amateur naturalist. The ailanthus, considered a noxious weed by many, would have been all the more endearing to Burchfield, who preferred uncultivated plants for their overlooked charm. In the painting, ailanthus branches reach up in supplication to the sky over the roof of Burchfield’s home in a reverential gesture, made two years after his mid-life adoption of the Lutheran faith.

A solitary oak leaf standing upright in the snow became Burchfield’s symbol of endurance and faith in his 1960 painting, The Constant Leaf (also known as The Steadfast Leaf) (fig. 2). Its theme is similar to O. Henry’s short story, “The Last Leaf” (1907), in which a girl, who suffered with pneumonia, believed she would die when the final leaf fell from the vine outside her window. The leaf miraculously remained and she recovered. Like the girl, Burchfield was gravely ill with asthma during the winter of 1957-58. Daily, from the window he watched the oak leaf defy
the icy winds and remain ensconced in the snow in his neighbor’s yard. This quotidian object became a talisman for spiritual perserverance: “I saw in it a symbol of the need of holding fast to my faith in spite of my affliction.”22 In March, as Burchfield recovered, his wife, Bertha, retrieved the leaf and they placed it in a book to preserve it. Two years later, he memorialized his personal allegory in this painting.

Wildflowers are also among Burchfield’s most common allegorical subjects. He was remarkably familiar with wildflowers, able to identify hundreds of species. In an undated notebook believed to be from around 1912 or 1913, Burchfield recorded 125 “Flowers I know,” and later in the same volume expanded the “List of Flowers” to 30 varieties, including skunk cabbage, several types of hepaticas, spring beauties, anenomes, violets, blood root, spiderwort, and trillium. Importantly, Burchfield attributed to flowers and other plants his own symbolic meaning. Hepaticas, one of Burchfield’s favorites, recur as symbols of spring, regeneration, and health. During one of his earliest encounters with hepaticas, in March 1911, Burchfield was so delighted by their delicate beauty that he picked some for his mother.

At one place along the path, I was walking along whistling at the top of my voice, when I saw an Hypatica [sic]—a single little pale blue Hypatica blooming all by itself in all the dead leaves—my first Hypatica! I stooped down and carefully picked it—it seemed a pity to thus kill it, but I wanted to show [it] to Mother—and almost tenderly put it in my buttonhole, for safekeeping. Hypaticas blooming! yet it is Spring when they come again!23
Burchfield recorded in his flower notebook that he first saw hepaticas in bloom on April 10, 1912, but that undoubtedly meant it was the first time he had seen them that year. Each time that Burchfield saw hepaticas it felt like the “first time.” *First Hepaticas* (fig. 3), painted in 1918, portrays the typical scene that Burchfield sought. A dead winter forest is filled with barren trees, the remains of a rotted tree trunk stand by a pool of water highlighted in the center distance, and beneath an ancient hollowed tree, in the velvety darkness, bent hepaticas raise their tiny heads out of a blanket of decayed leaves signalling the rebirth of spring.

Hepaticas instantly conjured up memories and associations that made Burchfield rhapsodic. In 1961, after years of serious illness, Burchfield painted *Hepatica Window* (fig. 4) in reaction to a Finnish story about a dying man whose “oldest boy, who was about twelve years old, went out into the woods, and before spring, . . . dug up a hepatica plant, brought it home, and put it in the window so that the sun would bring it to life. And then, when it did, he presented it to his father. And that idea appealed to me very much.” In the same spirit, Burchfield frequently transplanted the dainty wildflowers from their natural woodland home to his home garden or potted them for Bertha, as the highest token of his affection.

Since childhood Burchfield established the daily habit of wandering through the countryside, taking note of the variety of plants and trees, the sounds of birds and insects, and changes in weather and seasons. His observations, as they were recorded in his art and journals, reflected the emotional pitch of his thoughts and moods. For example, he wrote ecstatically about his findings on an outing with his brother, Joe, on April 15, 1916:

The Glens - Ochre boiling river, - frothing white rapids sunlit; dk [dark] green pines - wind at times - saw hepaticas [sic] for first time in my life - I reviewed old forgotten paths of the imagination - as I sat spellbound gazing at the delicate flowers, listening to the booming roar of the rapids - I felt the world was beautiful after all - seeing a single hepatica [sic] blooming on a mossy boulder I conceived [sic] a picture of this flower set alone, in the midst of the immense valleys & churning rivers — a momentary glimpse [sic] of heaven. **25**
PL. 1. AFTERGLOW, July 8, 1916, watercolor with pencil, 19½ x 14, Burchfield Art Center, Gift of Tow
PL 2. AILANTHUS BRANCH IN WINTER, 1946, watercolor, 29 x 25, Burchfield Art Center, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. J. Alfred Fabro and Friends of Robert I. Millonzi, in memory of Robert I. Millonzi, 1986.
Pl. 3. THE RAVINE, 1916,
watercolor and pencil, 8½ x 11¼,
Burchfield Art Center, Gift of Terry
Rogers, 397-385.
Pl. 5. NATURE'S GOTHIC
WINDOWS, May 1916, watercolor
with pencil. 9 x 12. Burchfield Art;
Copyright, gift of Gray Son, 03/91.
Pl. 6. AFTERNOON IN THE
GROVE, July 11, 1916, watercolor
with pencil, 14 x 20, Burchfield Art
Center, Buffalo, New York.
Pl. 8. UNTITLED (GOTHIC WINDOW TREES), 1918, watercolor with pencil, 14 x 10, Burchfield Art Center, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald A. Ross, 1988.52.
Pl. 9. LOCUST TREES IN SPRING,
1955, watercolor, 39½ x 29½ (sight).
(Courtesy Colby College.)
Pl. 13. FANTASY OF HEAT,
1952-58, watercolor, 40 x 30

(Reproduced in color)
Pl. 14. STUDIO DOODLING NO. 1, undated, black and orange colored pencil, 11 x 17\hspace{1pt}, Burchfield Art Center, Gift of the Artist, 1967.
Pl. 15. THE SALEM BEDROOM
STUDIO, February 21, 1917,
watercolor and gouache, 27 1/8 x 22,
Burchfield Art Center, Gift of the
Deborah Burchfield Foundation, 1972.