

**The Mind's Blue Eye**  
Berkeleian Casts in the Poetry of Richard Wilbur

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## Summary

One is struck, throughout the poetry of Richard Wilbur, by a tantalizing resemblance to the work of two close contemporaries: Howard Nemerov in the United States and Philip Larkin in Great Britain. Wilbur admired both, rating Nemerov pre-eminent in the United States. And yet, Wilbur refuses to be the Larkin or the Nemerov of America. The guardedly celebratory conservatism of Larkin is there in Wilbur, as are the ingeniously constructed poetic forms; the moral wryness of Nemerov is there too, with the New Critical preference for the tight lyric. There is, in addition, an unpredictability in the poems, leading to sharp shifts, often turning on a multiple pun, and, above all, an observer's detachment that accords attention and significance to light, colour, and movement. These extra qualities are scarcely unique grounds for claiming distinction for Wilbur's poetry. Rather, over and above these, he seems to have an intuitive conviction of the mind-extending possibilities so empirically worked out in Berkeley's essays on the theory of vision and the principles of human knowledge. There is a paradox in a poet who happily takes licence from Berkeley, the philosopher who sought to strip the 'garniture' of words from pure ideas. Wilbur seeks to de-construct visual and sensory world as Berkeley does [cf. *An Event*, *NCP* 274; *Epistemology*, *NCP* 288], but then to re-clothe it in appropriate words.

It is this very emphasis on words, always on the exact, nicely judged word, that is the main delight of the poetry and the necessarily central focus of this thesis. The poetry is examined for its thematic threads of order-in-disorder, synaesthesia of sound and sight, and for the yield of Wilbur's own area of empirical experiment: the hypnopompic and hypnagogic states.

Wilbur has come in for much criticism for failing to show a marked departure in his poetry from the tightly fashioned New Critical poem, as Lowell and Rich did. One of those who has devoted a whole book to Wilbur, Bruce Michelson, while welcoming the appearance of dramatic monologue in Wilbur's *The Mind Reader* collection of 1976, wished the poet would "put out something big or flashy enough to turn more heads and absolutely stop all this talk about safety and propriety" [*RWC*, p.138]. Wilbur has not sought to take American poetry to yet some other avant-garde position. Indeed, it was his undoubted mastery of conventional form that so vexed Randall Jarrell [cf. *RWC*, p.85] and created the critical hope voiced by Michelson. The thesis examines and defends Wilbur's choice to persevere with the deposition of poems, each worthy of its maker, which yet have the force of collective reticence.

The poet is equally distinguished as a translator of Molière and Racine, and his poetry

in general contains a high proportion of translations, particularly from the Russian and the French. The thesis does examine the Russian translations, determining their merit from the standpoint of poetry in English and pointing out phonetic and metric felicities exploited by Wilbur. The play translations, amounting to a substantial and separate body of work, are not directly considered, but Wilbur's introductions to these works [cf. ch.5] are revealing of his technical approach to poetry.

One other area given special attention is Wilbur's public poetry, and the sparing use of the private in his poetry. No aspect of the poetry worthy of attention is ignored for the sake of thematic cohesion and so, this thesis is consciously discursive. The subject insists that he does not write programmatically: cf. *Responses*, 125, "each of my poems, as I write it, seems to me unique; complete; quite unrelated to anything else I have done." No thematic frame, therefore, was superimposed on this study. Nonetheless, the cumulative weight of the discursive evidence is held to be convincing: that this poet has demonstrated that there is no need, necessarily, to break the mould of poetry time and again; that the finest poetry continues to make relevant utterance within, while reserving the liberty to take liberty with, prescribed forms.

## CHAPTER I

### APPROACHING RICHARD WILBUR

A compression contrived through metaphor and pun characterises the poetry of Richard Wilbur. His masterful deployment of these traditional devices, his art consummately concealing art, has led his critics to call for more robust utterance from him, and his champions to be exegetical in his defence. The layered meaning of his word-play irritates his critics as much as it delights his defenders. Two poem-by-poem surveys of his poetry have been published to date, in 1967 and 1997. Thirty nine dissertations or master's theses are recorded between 1967 and 1994.<sup>1</sup> Various themes and preoccupations divined in Wilbur are the subject of articles and papers: his 'poetry of objects'; the observation of nature; religious and philosophical strands. Donald Hill's 1967 survey of Wilbur's poetry pre-dates three of the collections gathered in *New and Collected Poems* and Rodney Edgecombe's (1997) *Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Richard Wilbur*, an agreement with Wilbur's agents failing, does not quote directly from the poems. Wilbur, in response to an enquiry as to the order the poems in his published collections, has said, lightly, that it was a case of long, followed by short; heavy, followed by trivial [Butts (1990), *Conversations with Richard Wilbur*, pp.142-3]. In any case, while there are occasional pairings of like poems, there are no cantos, sonnet sequences or serial poems. The poet's arrangement of *NCP* suggests that he would not have wished such evidence of premeditated composition and production to emerge. The collections in *NCP* after 1947 move in intervals of 3, 6, 5, 8, 7 and 11 years to 1987. Within the collections, the individual poems are not dated, though they might have been, since many had appeared elsewhere, and more than half of his second, third and fourth collections had appeared in the *New Yorker* alone. Hill, noting this, wrote that 'even if the the themes are not precisely new, the poems are'.<sup>2</sup> A strictly sequential reading of *NCP* must defeat any attempt at demarcation of thematic succession. The poet's evident disinclination to reveal a chronological progression in thought may account for the prevalence of shorter studies on various aspects of prosody and philology in his work. The surface facility and felicity of his language is often, in contemporary critiques of his earlier collections—Randall Jarrell's criticisms are the archetype—condemned as a preoccupation with style at the expense of substance. The etymological, literary and classical wealth of allusion in the Wilbur language, when pursued, can, as notably in the case of Edgecombe, offer avenues of speculation into literary parallels with potentially limitless branchings.

1. Bixler and Hoogestraat (1991) "Richard Purdy Wilbur: A Review of Research and Criticism"

2. Hill (1967) *Richard Wilbur*. pp. 95,158..

Wilbur himself says:

Poetry's prime weapon is words, used for naming, comparison and the contrast of things. Its auxiliary weapons are rhythms, formal patterns, and rhymes.

[*Responses*, 220]

It is surprising that this and the many other lucid observations on poetry in *Responses* should not have prompted a study of Wilbur that judges the poet by his own yardstick. Formal schemes of rhyme, meter and strophic form are notable in his poetry for their variety, always closely pacing and pointing the words. The poet has said, in effect, 'look to the words'. Theme and voice are there renewed; it is notable that in his introduction to his translation of Molière's *Tartuffe* he says just that: 'trust the words. Trust them to convey the point and persons of the comedy'[Harvest edn., v]. A study that accepts this must, of necessity, dwell upon words and the work that Wilbur sets them to do. The part of that work done by the poets's choice of poetic form is, correspondingly, to be judged together with, and inseparably from, the words. On poetic form, Wilbur has famously remarked in his eponymous essay that 'the strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle'.<sup>3</sup> Wilbur's near contemporary John Hollander has just as famously demonstrated this maxim in his shape-poem "For a Thirtieth Birthday, with a bottle of Burgundy". As Paul Fussell points out, however, the poem, once past the shoulder of the bottle, passes the point of its visual wit, and our delight in its visual restraint dissipates.<sup>3A</sup> Wilbur's wit seldom fails; no more does his restraint, even in the longer monologues. His words, and sense, fill the metrical and stanzaic bottle each time, exactly.

...as if structure were a practically separable thing, instead of talking about the the need of a perpetual revolution of the entire sensibility.

[*Responses*, 215-223]

Thus Wilbur's 1948 response to the views of William Carlos Williams. 'Brash,' Wilbur himself calls his essay; but the latter phrase, 'a perpetual revolution of the entire sensibility', may later serve, taking him at his word, to test how Wilbur has served this revolution in his own poetry.

The personal voice is used sparingly by Wilbur:

I've always agreed with Eliot's assertion that poetry "is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality," ...I've thought of the poem [ ] as "a box to be opened," a created object, an altar cloth, a Japanese garden or ship of death. Not a message or confession. [Ostroff, 1964, p.19]

3. cf. Ciardi J., (1950) ed., *Mid Century American Poets*

3A. Fussell P. (1979) *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, p.171.

This declaration makes those of his poems with apparent autobiographical content the more interesting in consequence. Hyatt Waggoner claims that ‘such professions of Wilbur’s loyalty to Modernist theory as this come to be seen as somewhat misleading when we have read all the poetry’. Remarking on the ‘striking’ affinities between Wilbur’s poetry and that of Dickinson and Frost, and on his ‘frequent affinity *thematically*’[sic] with Hart Crane and Cummings, Waggoner describes this as surprising ‘in a poet more devoted to the anti-romantic stance than any poet who has emerged since Auden’.<sup>4</sup> Levey (1981) locates that stance in two chief differences between Wilbur and the Romantics: he, unlike they, does not see the worlds of the sense and the spirit as separate, and does not reject the present, imperfect material world for a Utopian alternative.<sup>4A</sup> Turley (1977) admires the mid-stanza shifts of the narrative line in “Castles and Distances” [NCP 289] and ascribes its ‘rush of meaning through the elaborate stanza mesh, the bristle of alliteration, the stress of Anglo-Saxon words’, all to Hopkins.<sup>5</sup> Wilbur has declared his liking for Anglo-Saxon alliteration and rhythmic stress [cf. Butts, 56], but has not ascribed it to Hopkins. The two-stroke alliterations in “Driftwood” [NCP 321-2] are also unmistakably Anglo Saxon, and the offset hemistichs of “Junk” and “Lilacs” [NCP 185, 118] would appear to be unique to Wilbur. The poet has said that every poem of his is autonomous [Responses, p.118]. The deliberate avoidance of thematic or stylistic grouping within the collections seems intended as a reminder of this—though Bixler selects the theme of *seeing* as one that ‘runs through his canon like a golden thread’ and was prompted by the following, from Responses, p.171: ...if an alternative measure of stature might not be the extent to which any poet has given sustained, forceful and original treatment to a theme of some consequence?<sup>6</sup>

The pursuit of poetic influence in style and, above all, in thought, is yet apt to break down in the face of the insistence that autonomous attention be given to each poem. To persevere thematically is to run the risk of imposing a reading on the poetry. This thesis proceeds, rather, by the examination of individual poems as geological core-samples. Wilbur’s embedded, lapidary use of words is assayed where encountered for its sheer, glinting brilliance. Thematic threads emerge and recur, and help to cohere what is read and heard, but thematic harping is *not* what this poet would have us hear in the foreground. Rather, as he has said, in the naming, comparison and contrast of things is the work of his poetry to be perceived. That would seem to echo Pound’s recommended method of careful,

4. Waggoner, H., *American Poets: from the Puritans to the present*, Boston: Hghtn.Mifflin, 1968, p.597.

4A. Virginia Levey. “The World of Objects in Richard Wilbur’s Poetry”, p.42.

5. Turley (1977), *The American Moment*, p.41-2.

6. Bixler, *Richard Wilbur: “Hard as Nails”*, p.2.

first-hand observation of the matter and continual (or, here, occasional) comparison of one slide specimen with another. Wilbur's method is to proceed by New Critical rationality, with a subversive agenda of consciousness exploration that is all-pervasive and ineluctable. Following Wilbur's own reverse chronology, the thread of Berkeleian speculation may be found among the latest poems and followed back to the earliest:

In the strict sense, of course,  
We invent nothing, merely bearing witness  
To what each morning brings again to light:  
/  
All these things  
Are there before us; there before we look  
Or fail to look; there to be seen or not  
By us,  
/  
And so with that most rare conception, nothing.  
What is it, after all, but something missed?

“Lying” [NCP 9]

Though lifted out of direct context—Wilbur describes this poem as dealing with the world as a ‘dense tissue of resemblances’.<sup>7</sup>—these lines, especially the latter two, must recall the famous lines of Berkeley, from his *Principles of Human Knowledge*:

there is nothing easier to imagine than trees, ...in a park, ...or books existing  
in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them.. ...what is all this, I beseech you,  
more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call *books* and *trees*.<sup>8</sup>

In “The Eye” [NCP 57], Wilbur invites St Lucy, the patron saint of eyesight, to “Charge me to see / In all bodies the beat of spirit,”. This encodes Berkeley's own conclusion, that “the cause of ideas is an incorporeal active substance or spirit”. Nor is it any elegant literary piety, as the ‘lewd espials’ of Part I are a deliberate play on the ‘lawful espials’ of the king in *Hamlet* [III, 1]. Wilbur, in his own notes towards an explication of the poem, says that the notion of a prayer to St Lucy, when it occurred to him, discovered the graver yet still dramatic tone he had been looking for in order to restate positively in Part II the negative ontology of the closing lines of Part I.<sup>9</sup> Compounding this with his comment that the poem was intended in part to be a criticism of the ‘stand-offish, self-protective, and coldly connoisseurial use of the eye as one may find in Stevens’ poems’, Berkeley's words may be heard as the call to reject the Stevensian note in:

An unseen genius of the middle distance,  
Giddy with godhead or with nonexistence.  
[NCP 56]

7. Wilbur. *The Catbird's Song* (1997) p.140.

8. Cottingham, J. (ed.). *Western Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell (1996) p.95.

9. Turner, Alberta T. (1977) p.336.

and to add, as Reibetanz has noted, a square refutation of Eliot's 'sad formula' for detachment.<sup>10</sup> Wilbur, among his comments on "Lying" (cf. Berg, *op.cit.*, 302,3), has said that 'It is a fundamental impulse of poetry to refresh the aspect of things', and that 'Comedy is serious; it is the voice of balance; and its presence in a serious poem is a test and earnest of its earnestness.' On this, taking Wilbur at his word once more, one might reappraise "A Problem from Milton" [NCP 311] which flaunts humour to a degree that it invites dismissal as a piece of mere whimsy. References to the Deity as 'our general sire' and a wickedly funny pun on devilled eggs in a reference to Adam's brain are bettered by this:

In spirals of the whelk's eternal shell  
The mind of Swedenborg to heaven flew,  
But found it such a mathematic hell  
That Emerson was damned if it would do. [NCP 311]

The joke, at Emerson's expense, recalling that divine's exclusion from Harvard for his particular transcendentalist views, calls serious attention to the divergent conclusions of the two philosophers from the same evidence. One need not suppose that Wilbur is unacquainted with later thinking in philosophy, from the metaphysical immaterialism of Berkeley to the behavioural functionalism of Gilbert Ryle. He chooses, rather, to toy with the Berkeleian idea of the known world as a projection of the mind, ever trailing Berkeleian clues to his train of thought:

Praise to all fire-fledged knowledge of the kind  
That, stooped beneath a hospitable roof,  
Brings only hunch and gaiety for proof

"The Fourth of July" [NCP 70]

and:

As when a set mind, blessed by doubt,  
Relaxes into mother-wit.  
Flowers, I said, will come of it

April 5, 1974" [NCP 78]

The particular contexts of the poems in question can obscure the background signal from Wilbur's metaphysical crystal set. The first date is laden, as is the poem, with significance for America; the second is a date in Spring, publicly significant only for its seasonality—the intermittent signals in both convey the same message: lateral thinking, cross-connections. While Edgecombe has made thoroughly satisfactory connections between the Lewis Carroll, General Grant's Vicksburg, and Carolus Linnaeus [*op.cit.*, 132], in "The Fourth of July", the poem seems to strew a more obvious paper-trail to the later Wittgenstein: Mr

10. Reibetanz, John. "What Love Sees: Poetry and Vision in Richard Wilbur", p.83.

Dodgson, ‘mocking all grammars; Alice, lost for words in the ‘termless wood’; Copernicus ‘Not hesitant to risk / His dream-stuff in the fitting-rooms of fact’. In “April 5, 1974” the incongruity of the steaming landscape in the Spring thaw permits expressions of incredulous amazement that are, of course, really directed at those occasional distortions of the angle of perception which allow us to challenge paradigms:

Was matter getting out of hand  
And making free with natural law?  
/  
A fact as eerie as a dream [NCP 78]

Berkeley determined that we learn the laws of nature from experience, which teaches us that ‘such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas’ [c.f. Cottingham, 97]. “The Fourth of July” delivers in the end a message on Black civil rights, with a fervour in its five lines that recalls nothing so much as Vaughan Moody’s “Gloucester Moors”. It took a year for Grant to ‘topple Vicksburg like a house of cards’. It took anger to wake Alice up and topple the tyranny of the playing cards. If Wilbur rebuts Berkeley with ‘The sun is not a concept but a star’, it is only to sustain a conceit: that the working-out of revelation can be attended by ‘troubled sleep, debates, / Great bloodshed, and a century’s delay’.

The Berkeleian conundrum is again enunciated in “The Aspen and the Stream”

Beholding element, ...  
/  
O deep surrendered mind, where cloud and stone  
Compose their beings and efface your own, [NCP 205]

and in “Lamarck Elaborated”

It was the mind that taught the head to swim [NCP 243]

The whole of “An Event” [NCP 274] is a speeded-up Berkeleian speculation: perception is defeated by motion; unseen motion escapes thought. The world is indeed ‘dreamt’ by ‘cross-purposes’; that is to say, in Berkeley’s own words, necessarily by some ‘incorporeal active substance or spirit’. The connectedness of sense impressions assured Berkeley of the ‘wisdom and benevolence’ of the world’s Author [c.f. Cottingham, 96,7]. Wilbur playfully suggests that a flight of swallows defeats the ‘nets and cages’ of connected thought and may, for a moment, Kant notwithstanding, allow the viability of a metaphysics free of obligation to the expressible. “A Chronic Condition” is a Berkeleian meditation in which the philosopher is invoked by name:

Berkeley did not foresee such misty weather,  
Nor centuries of light  
Intend so dim a day. [NCP 275]

This is sombre language to precede a witty exercise. What reversal of enlightenment is alluded to cannot itself be guessed at from the remainder of the poem. The fog of unknowing that envelops the Berkeleian trees leaves the poet, at the end, swaying and leaning above the ‘vanished ground’. Playful workings in Wilbur poem invariably invite pursuit of more subtle allusions, in this case to the need for anchor points of familiarity by which to position ourselves in the world; and to the ultimate anchor point of the Deity, a conclusion amply signposted by mention of a fall of sparrows. The robust challenge of “Epistemology” exemplifies Wilbur’s delighted insistence, albeit a tongue-in-cheek one, on a Berkeleian immateriality of matter except as constituted in the mind—the better that poet and reader may circumvent the inertia of paradigmatic ‘fact’:

Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson, break your bones:  
But cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.

[NCP 288]

Berkeley’s insistence that ‘the existence of an idea consists in being perceived’, i.e. sighted or sensed, is played on through references to ‘mind’s eye’ or ‘mind’s ear’ in six poems (NCP29,196,313,366,377), through abstract usages of the word ‘eye’ in a dozen more (NCP40,57,81,109,205,249,274,324,325,334,348,360), in a typical dream-journey of inner sight in “Clearness” [NCP 313], likewise to vision and insight in “Icarium Mare” [NCP 20-1], “Walking to Sleep” [NCP 158] and, in a memorable half-quatrain, in “A Wedding Toast”:

Which is to say that what love sees is true;  
That the world’s fullness is not made but found.

[NCP 61]

Perception yielding a ‘continual succession of ideas’, and those perception-generated ideas being inert in themselves, Berkeley would have us attend to perception and then to proceed from observed associations. Wilbur observes the same rule: the content of his poetry, as Kenneth Johnson has noted, is the observation of quotidian reality; his style to weigh possible responses or interpretations.<sup>11</sup> John Reibetanz says that Wilbur realized that he needed to bring vision more into play with things, to widen it so that it could comprehend more of the world around him; and that in so doing he was not hampered by W.C.

Williams’

‘intellectually handicapped and psychologically naive’ insistence upon “no ideas but in things”; and was not engaged, like Williams, in the ultimately task of effacing his ideas—his vision—in order to express things more directly.<sup>12</sup> Wilbur may have read neither Arnheim nor Gombrich on the psychology of perception, but seems to have intuitively

11. Johnson, K., “Virtues in Style, Defect in Content: The Poetry of Richard Wilbur”, p.210.

12. Reibetanz, J., “What Love Sees: Poetry and Vision in Richard Wilbur”, p.71.

grasped that eyesight alone cannot put us into direct contact with the world of phenomena. As Hill (1967) puts it, “The Beacon” [NCP 249] is about the search for reality and the modes by which we apprehend it [ibid., 114]. Taking that as the whole Berkeleian premise, the poem goes beyond, to Kant’s concept of *a priori* preconditions of understanding. Kant discovered, happily for poets, that it is intuition only, and not any amount of empirically associative thinking, that discovers in the union of seven and five the number twelve. Edgecombe categorises “The Beacon” as an epistemological meditation working with a light-of-reason topos [ibid., 75]. Johnson notes the similarity with Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West”: the beacon, representing man’s mind, not only reveals the sea but creates an order—“sea-roads”—out of it [ibid., 211]. In Wilbur’s poem, accessible allusions, Greek and Christian, admit the reader to the play of text and sub-text:

Founded on rock and facing the night-fouled sea  
 A beacon blinks at its own brilliance,  
 Over and over with cutlass gaze  
 Solving the Gordian waters,  
 Making the sea-roads out,  
[NCP 249]

A Christian reference to Peter, the rock of the church. *Fouled* in the maritime sense means knotted or tangled-up. The beacon in this parable represents man’s mind, which makes order, ‘sea-roads’, out of the knotted darkness of unknowing. But, as Edgecombe points out [ibid], Alexander’s solution was an expedient short-cut. What the human eye makes out is, as well, for much of stanzas two and three, a melange of analogy, metaphor and myth. Without philosophical insight, that is how we make sense of what is beyond our intellectual range.

Then in the flashes of darkness it is all gone,  
 /  
. . .and the dark of the eye  
 Dives for the black pearl  
 Of the sea-in-itself.  
[ibid.]

The ‘sea-in-itself’ is the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*; unknowable, yielding only to inference from the nature of experience. Knowledge of the unknowable would be a metaphysical pearl beyond price (as Hill has noted, before wading into the wash of possible explications that the rest of the poem trails). In this poem word-play tugs like an undertow, as in:

Watching the blinded waves  
 Compounding their eclipse, we hear their  
 Booms, rumors and guttural sucks  
 Warn of the pitchy whirl  
 At the mind’s end. [NCP 249]

The trope of consciousness-liberation at the moment of waking from or falling into sleep, a Wilbur staple, is employed here as well:

All of the sense of the sea  
Is veiled as voices nearly heard  
In morning sleep; nor shall we wake  
At the sea's heart.  
[ibid.]

Obscurity thickens yet more:

Rail  
At the deaf unbeatable sea, my soul, and weep  
Your Alexandrine tears,  
[ibid.]

Edgecombe has taken the trouble to locate Alexander's tears on the banks of the Hyphasis, and the preceding line, of course, is an alexandrine; and tears of impotence might well be occasioned by an unbeatable, i.e. an unscannable tract. At the point of despair, the poem offers hope:

but look:  
The beacon-blaze unsheathing turns  
The face of darkness pale  
And now with one grand chop gives clearance to  
Our human visions,  
[ibid.]

These human visions are the limited beacons of the mind, 'which assume /The waves again, fresh and the same.' Much in the final proposition that follows turns on the many meanings of 'assume':

Let us suppose that we  
See most of darkness by our plainest light.  
It is the Nereid's kick endears  
The tossing spray; a sighted ship  
Assembles all the sea.

[NCP 249-50]

Hill offers the likely Wilbur distinction between 'endears' (engages our affections) and 'assembles' (orders and makes intelligible). Edgecombe likens the ship to a compositional pointer which gives concentric form to the seascape—equally admissible in the work of a painter's son. The lunar frothings of the 'tossing spray' may be the slapping uncertainties of our waves of knowing and unknowing. For us, as for the Greeks, the Nereid's kick lends a necessary anthropomorphis, but it is the sighting of some crewed and therefore itself 'sighted' ship that suddenly contains the frightening deep of unknowing within the chart of navigable calculation. When such a vessel—of enlightenment?—hoves into view, we hail it.

Mary S. Mattfield, considering “Water Walker” [NCP 338] sees image in some of Wilbur’s best work as ‘a kind of metaphysical conceit which intensifies his meaning by its delicate irony and incongruity’.<sup>13</sup> The larval thread of history is fantastically strung from biblical times to “Geneseo” Illinois, to the poet’s beloved Maine; connecting the apostle Paul, the truth-carrier, to the the caddis fly who ‘floats his heirs’ in dying. Such are the quick progressions in the verse which F.C. Golffing, seeing them as connecting Wilbur with Marianne Moore, thought to be the main interest of the poetry in *The Beautiful Changes*; these being ‘quick, subtle, seemingly inconsequent and, in nine cases out of ten, right’. What Golffing saw as Wilbur’s own was ‘his special gift for the genteel, non-metaphysical conceit’, and added that this ‘illuminates the hidden correspondences between natural and moral phenomena’.<sup>14</sup> If one selects from among the dictionary meanings for metaphysical: ‘incorporeal, supernatural’ (Collins), gentility and morality need not come into it. Nor do they in Wilbur’s poetry. Four collections after that reviewed by Golffing, Wilbur is still waxing metaphysical in the perception of natural phenomena. Contemplating woodland variety and profusion in “Fern Beds in Hampshire County” the seeming disorder in the very natural order releases the metaphysical speculation:

...the whole wood conspires, by change of kind,  
To break the purchase of the gathering mind,  
[NCP 125]

What follows after this, the fourth couplet in a poem of thirty four lines, is licensed fancy: ferns compared to pensive quills, to waves of ‘green infantry’ as the ferns, the oldest of plant forms, respond to the sea’s squally command to colonise the land as first life did, emerging from the sea. The gentle, imagistic metaphysics of this poem are in keeping with Wilbur’s more relaxed, less wrought, later style. A poem from the height of what might be termed his New Critical phase, “Lamarck Elaborated”, relishes in a send-up of Lamarckian theory:

It was the song of doves begot the ear  
/  
The yielding water, the repugnant stone,  
/  
Attired in sense the tactless finger-bone  
[NCP 243]

13. Mattfield: “Some Poems of Richard Wilbur”. *Ball State University Forum*, 1970, p.14.

14. Salinger, W., (1983): *Richard Wilbur’s Creation*, pp.32-3.

The comedy points to the serious, central dilemma that preoccupied Berkeley: what is thought? Poet and philosopher come to the same conclusion:

Out of our vivid ambiance came unsought  
All sense but that most formidably dim.

[ibid.]

The poet can be happy that philosophy has not resolved everything to a certainty:

The shell of balance rolls in seas of thought. [ibid.]

The same deceptively playful treatment is evident in both poems. Appearing in the same collection as “Fern Beds”, another poem with a title taken from nature is “Thyme Flowering Among Rocks”. A poem of seventeen-syllable stanzas in the Haiku form, it opens with a rueful comparison:

This, if Japanese,  
Would represent grey boulders  
Walloped by rough seas  
[NCP 142]

Such is not the case. The poet is ‘Here, where things are what / They are,’—in America, a resolutely non-metaphysical country, he seems to say. What Wilbur says, in David Lehman’s *Ecstatic Occasions: Expedient Forms*, is that the poem happened because ‘grovelling amongst herbs reminded me how much we lose of the world’s wonder by perceiving things in an upright posture from usual distances’, and, that it is an experiment in quantitative structure ‘playing against a speech rhythm which carries the motion and emotion’ [ibid., 231]. That in the same commentary he also says ‘I hate formal exercises’, is warrant enough to see what else Wilbur is about. Lost to scale in Lilliputian focus, he briefly stretches a metaphysical tripwire across a drill:

You  
Are lost now in dense  
Fact, fact which one might have thought  
Hidden from the sense,  
[NCP 143]

A socio-political allusion to the American penchant exhaustive detail is added:

Blinking at detail  
/  
Lost to proper scale

The effect is repeated with a pelagic simile:

As, in the motion  
Of striped fins, a bathysphere  
Forgets the ocean.

It makes the craned head Spin. [ibid.]

The echo of the punning line in “Lamarck” is heard:

It was the mind that taught the head to swim  
[NCP 243]

The concluding apostrophe, and invocation of Basho, the seventeenth century Japanese master of Haiku, are not just a Western Romantic flourish. Basho and his disciples urged a fusion of perception and the spontaneous feeling emanating from the object itself.<sup>15</sup>

Unfathomed thyme! The world's  
A dream, Basho said,  
Not because that dream's  
A falsehood, but because it's  
Truer than it seems

[NCP 143]

The insistence here is not Basho's, but Wilbur's; that much of the 'dense fact' of cosmic order hidden from our senses may be guessed at from the racemous architecture of the thyme plant, and by extension, from close contemplation of any natural form.

#### CRITICISM AND RESPONSE

His predilection for metaphysical optics has betimes, especially in his earlier collections, engaged or irritated his critics, depending on their disposition, and forms the core of the debate about Wilbur's relevance as a contemporary poet. And not only about the early poetry; in his late *New Poems*, he 'angles after metaphysical insight and aesthetic delight',<sup>16</sup> as in "Trolling for Blues" [NCP 29], "Shad Time"[NCP 35], and "Hamlen Brook" [NCP 41]. As with his published output, there is now the work of more than forty years in Richard Wilbur criticism. The MLA bibliographic directory for 1963 through September, 1999 lists one hundred and sixty three reviews and papers; while the Bixler and Hoogestraat review of Wilbur research and criticism (1994) notes the appearance of twenty dissertations and nineteen master's theses since 1967. Bibliographies by John Field, Marcia B. Dineen, Frances Bixler, and Bruce Michelson take the criticism, variously, up to 1991. Jack W.C. Hagstrom's bibliography, latterly advanced in collaboration with John Lancaster of Amherst College, is not yet published, though Wendy Salinger acknowledges access to it. The work concerns itself with Wilbur's own writings. Published criticism divides into three groupings: reviews; explicatory papers on particular poems, and thematic explorations. To mark Wilbur's turning sixty, a collection of criticism—not a festschrift—was assembled under the editorship of Salinger in *Richard Wilbur's Creation* (1983). Salinger's own introduction offers an explicatory overview of Wilbur's poetry in context. If a 'preoccupation with craftsmanship', as Salinger says, was reactive to the experience of world-turmoil and the ensuing A-bomb threat, then the formative influences on Wilbur were unexceptional; he himself has repeatedly said, in answer to the same question, that the

15. Higginson, W.J., *The Haiku Handbook*, New York: Kodansha, 1985, p.10.

16. Harris, P., "Forty Years of Richard Wilbur: The Loving Work of an Equilibrist", 1990, p.418.

impetus to write poetry came from the immediate chaos of foxhole warfare. His life-long adherence to strict craftsmanship has become, mistakenly, his admirers would argue, the critical issue. Salinger's own observations provide some orientation-points to the criticism:

Things, objects, "thingness" are a central concern in his poetry  
...His deepest instincts are metaphoric.

[RWC 4]

The central tension in Wilbur's poetry between the eye... and the object  
...Wilbur is not a direct descendant of the imagists,

[RWC 5]

Our sense of language and our sense of reality are inextricably bound.  
This is the great mystery and joy of writing... this mystery has always  
been at the heart of Richard Wilbur's work. He writes *about* it as well  
as *from* it... This is also the paradox that twentieth-century physics teaches  
us: reality is only what we know of reality, therefore reality is *how* we know it.

[RWC 16-17]

Raw reality leading to Lowellian 'raw' poetry is rare in Wilbur. Of two mild examples, Salinger remarks that

Wilbur is no more at ease with the unmediated response in the  
political realm than he is in the personal. ..."A Miltonic Sonnet for  
Mr Johnson" [and] "For the Student Strikers" have a conspicuous rhetorical  
stiffness.

[RWC 10]

Mary S. Mattfield's tentative conclusion (1970 Ball State University Forum) was that Wilbur satisfied Auden's condition of continuous maturation by 'a steady and quiet deepening and mellowing of vision'. Salinger suggests that Wilbur's own championing of Housman against Auden's charge of stylistic inertia may be Wilbur's own defence:

I wonder if an alternative measure of stature might not be the extent to which  
any poet has given sustained, forceful, and original treatment to a theme of some  
consequence?

[RCW 12]

The implication is that development is not so easily to be traced in the non-confessional voice speaking through formal measures; that the confessional voice creates a masking *persona*, the counter-example of Lowell notwithstanding. In any case, Wilbur had pointed out that the change in a poet is not always for the better and that, in some cases anyway—he cites Herbert as an example—much of a poet's output may come out of a relatively short period [*Responses* 171]. The criticism selected in Salinger is presented in chronological order and traces the reception accorded Wilbur's successive collections. The first piece, from Louise Bogan, disposes of the the natural suspicion that any young poet's first outpourings may be derivative:

Wilbur is still plainly entangled with the technical equipment of his favourite poetic forerunners, specifically, Marianne Moore, Eliot, Rilke, and Hopkins... He has had the wit, however, to point up these influences from time to time with invisible quotation marks of near-parody

[RWC 30].

F.C. Golfing's review of *The Beautiful Changes* insists that 'two of Mr Wilbur's favourite devices stem from Marianne Moore' (a lingering focus on particulars and a sudden, anecdotal closure). Golfing also, in the face of an explanatory note on "The Waters" supplied by Wilbur, refers to 'a gratuitous loan from Hölderlin, quite meaningless in the context'. The criticism anticipates some of Jarrell's later praise for and impatience with Wilbur [cf. Salinger, 46-9, 85]; it concludes with the admission that two of the poems in the collection ("Grace" and the eponymous "The Beautiful Changes") are 'as good as any poetry written in English today, save Eliot and Stevens at their best.' [RWC 32-3]

Babette Deutsch, reviewing Wilbur's second collection, *Ceremony*, and singling out "A Simile for Her Smile", "Castles and Distances", and "A World Objects", pays them a tribute that Wilbur himself would have sought [cf. Butts, p.227]: they should not, she writes, be paraphrased. Another reviewer, Joseph Bennett, applies epithets like 'precious', 'gassy', 'mushy, screechy', and 'very unfunny' to some of the poems in *Ceremony*, and concludes that others ("Years End", "The Terrace") are 'marred by forced conclusions'—yet concludes with these words: 'Wilbur's is the strongest poetic talent I can see in America today below the generation now in their fifties' [RWC 38-41]. Reed Whittemore, commenting on the metaphysical dilemmas presented in four of *Ceremony* poems: "La Rose des Vents", "Conjuration", "A World without Objects", and "Castles and Distances", declares that:

Obviously in these poems Mr Wilbur is saying that the ideal is to be found in the real, the essence in experience, God in the world; he is proposing an immanent, as opposed to a transcendental, principle of being

[RWC 44].

That, if it is so, does not make Wilbur the apostolic successor to Stevens, with whose 'supreme fiction' he has found fault (cf. Butts, 51-2).

Randall Jarrell's now famous criticisms of Wilbur's early poetry need no repeating, except where they point to techniques that are commented on more fully by other and later critics: 'a skillful use of verbs and kinesthetic words. ...The poems are all scenes' [RWC 46]. Who would, one might respond, be without such scenes as those in "Objects" and "A Dutch Courtyard"?

John Ciardi, reviewing the third Wilbur collection, *Things of This World*, praises ‘Latin root-sense that shines through so much of Wilbur’s diction’ and affirms:

Nor is there any more valuable function the poet can perform than  
to reawaken the root sense of the language, to keep it a living instrument  
in the mouth of his people

[RWC 54-5].

Donald Hall is less effusive, and thinks that some small poems in the collection ‘add up to nothing’, while others are ‘flawed by the easy use of modifiers’. However, Hall also thinks that Wilbur’s couplet from “Epistemology”: ‘We milk the cow of the world and as we do / We whisper in her ear, “You are not true”’—is ‘a highly successful self-critique’, and that Wilbur, all the while, had been ‘negating as well as professing’ his *interior gorgeosity and exterior asceticism* [RWC 57,59] Another 1956 reviewer, M.L. Rosenthal, invites us to compare Wilbur’s “Event” unfavourably with Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of looking at a Blackbird”. ‘The younger poet’ Rosenthal writes, ‘has been almost forced into a blander, more discursive tack, for which even his highly developed grace and skill of rhetoric cannot fully compensate’ [RWC 64]. A one-sentence summary of Stevens’ poem will suffice to set up the argument: ‘This is a poem about perception which demonstrates that each act of vision re-creates reality and that every perception is a metaphor’ [Rehder (1988) p.59]. Wilbur’s poem is, rather, about the speed and disconnectivity of thought and our vain, hopeless, but compelling attempt in words to keep up with it. Stevens’ poem is composed of comparatively static images, each demonstrating, as Rehder explains, that the significance of the blackbird changes with its context, as if it were a word [ibid.]. Neither poem is necessarily inferior to the other. Wilbur’s is all kinetics of flight, and Stevens’ a panorama of thematically connected panels. Wilbur’s poem, moreover, is one instance where the poem is certainly not ‘all scene’, as Jarrell alleged.

Wilbur’s fourth collection, *Advice to a Prophet*, drew one of the most scathing of all the reviews. Theodore Holmes’ rhetoric represents anti-Wilbur prejudice at its most strident, though it must be said, that the words in Holmes’ case appear to have been uttered more in sorrow than in anger:

Nine-tenths of each poem is absorbed with the world that dupes us, and  
only at the end are we given some sibylline apostrophe of the life that eludes us.  
...It is the purview of things seen from the Parnassian heights of wealth, privilege,  
ease, refinement, and education, looking down on the permanent sufferings of  
humankind without being part of them. ...an essentially formal attachment to thought

[RWC 72-3].

Ralph J. Mills, looking back over volumes of Wilbur’s poems, and finding ‘little alteration

in general aim, manner, or voice', shelves the poet quite firmly for the reader:

his gifts and inclinations drew him toward the tradition of English lyricism which maintains its centre in formalism and wit and musical grace. Thus his natural predecessors can be located most easily among the Elizabethan, Metaphysical, and Cavalier poets, but also in Emily Dickinson and A.E. Houseman —and also ranks him, as 'an occasional poet of the finest kind' [RWC 79,82].

Jarrell again, in 1963, mellowing toward Wilbur, writes of:

His impersonal, exactly accomplished, faintly sententious skill...  
...poems [that are] little differentiated, complete-in-themselves universes that true works of art are. ...he obsessively sees, and shows, the bright underside of every dark thing [RWC 85].

The latter metaphor concedes that Wilbur does look, and look hard, at dark things.

By the time of Wilbur's fifth collection, *Walking to Sleep*, the acceptance is general. Henry Taylor is content to speculate with wry amusement that 'it is fun to imagine the enthusiasm which might have resulted if Wilbur had dispensed altogether with the formal complexity for which he is so well known' [RWC 89]. Taylor also gives this anecdotal thumbnail sketch of Wilbur's formalism:

I once heard Wilbur answer a student who had asked him about the meter of his poem; Wilbur began by saying that there was a pattern, but backed off after having counted on his fingers through the first stanza; he concluded by saying that he rarely counted syllables and stresses, but worked instead for what he called a rhythmical rightness which would coincide with a rightness he also wished to achieve in the tone and diction of each line, each poem [RWC 91].

Anthony Hecht, writing after the appearance of Wilbur's sixth volume, *The Mind Reader*, muses on Wilbur's persistence with formal measures and foregrounded word-play:

there are far too many poets who employ strict formal devices (e.g., Housman, Auden, Graves, Ransom) and in whose work verb-forms play an almost unnoticed part, to make it plausible to explain this distinctive quality of Wilbur's as no more than an inadvertence [RWC 125].

Hecht is examining and celebrating 'this richness of inflections, this abundance of verbs' with examples in which torrents burn, leaf duff brews, lofty premises are floored, water braids and spills, magmas lather, winds and water scuff, a glacier's heel abrades, blown newspapers scamper and whirl, a fire-truck blurs, a flock of birds rolls drunkenly; and waiter, dancer, and juggler all balance in mid-motion. The point is well made; the

examples are too many for mere coincidence. The supreme example is that in “Mind”[NCP 240], in which, as Hecht points out, ‘the very executive operations of the mind correspond to the the speed, the passage, the radar intelligence of bat’ [RWC 126]. Curiously though, because “Mind” is a simile and not a metaphor, the verbs there pertain to the bat only; since the mind, ungoverned by verbs, is capable of making a ‘graceful error’.

The reviews gathered in Part I of *Richard Wilbur’s Creation* conclude with *The Mind Reader* of 1976. Part II is devoted, so Salinger says, to ‘particular critical issues involved in Wilbur’s critical development through the decades’[RWC, 21]. Some generally pertinent observations from those latter reviews should be here recorded:

Charles F. Duffy notes that the ‘eleven or so’ poems of Wilbur’s on the the visual arts are mostly from his early work: six from the first volume, three from the second, one from the fourth and ‘just barely one’ from the fourth. For the son of a portrait artist then still living and painting, this is not surprising. The particular artists singled out for mention have, however: De Hooch, Delacroix, Bazille, Degas, and Magritte have, Duffy points out, a clear

representationalism of style in common and are all, even the romantic Delacroix ‘basically careful observers of what the eye sees’ [RWC 185]. Joseph Brodsky remarks crisply that ‘the formal perfection of Wilbur’s poems is nothing more than a mask’, noting that ‘Frost’s quiet didacticism and rural irony were the same kind of mask’ [RWC 205]. Charles R. Woodward, examining the ground-complaint against Wilbur, of being too cerebral, counters that ‘we cannot condemn him for his epistemological interests if we are to permit them to Wallace Stevens’. By the same token, Woodward says of Wilbur’s polar opposite, W.C. Williams:

It is not immediately apparent that Williams’ world is more “real” and thus more unhappy, than Wilbur’s, or that it deals more rigorously with its facts and artifacts, since it does not show any inclination to question the evidence of the senses as the basis of its epistemology

[RWC 227].

Apart from the Cummins and Wilcox monographs, only Hill, Edgecombe and Michelson, so far, have published book-length studies of the poet. The Bixler and Hoogestraat chronology and synopsis of Wilbur criticism and reviews itself runs to thirty five pages. Bibliographies of Wilbur’s works and of Wilbur criticism have been compiled by Field, Bixler, Dineen, and Michelson, and another by Hagstrom and Lancaster is still in progress. It is singular that so much criticism of this poet should be in the form of reviews, short literary articles and dissertations and that so little of this should have consolidated

into book form. Even among the longer papers and dissertations, none attempting a complete survey of the poetry has come to notice. Rather, are Wilbur studies characterised by metacognitive, philological, philosophical, synaesthetic, or other aspectual enquiry. When the poet himself has said that he is intuitive and non-programmatic in his compositional processes the diligence with which, Wilbur's own disclaimers notwithstanding, scholars and critics have sought to uncover subliminal programmatic patterns seems at times perverse.

Wilbur continues to give interviews, and a book-length interview is forthcoming from Between the Lines publishers. He has interviewed himself, in effect, in his lucid essays and addresses collected in *Responses* and *The Catbird's Song*. His gracious accessibility as a poet has in addition furnished a collection of recorded interviews and 'conversations' which by 1990 were collected in one volume edited by Butts: *Conversations with Richard Wilbur*, which containing nineteen interviews, the earliest dating from 1962. Butts' introduction notes that the interviewers' approach has become less confrontational as America itself swung back to a new conservatism, and that Wilbur himself, in his attitude toward his own teaching methods, has grown more stringent in his insistence on a knowledge of poetic form and tradition. In the interview with David Curry from 1962, Wilbur vigorously defends academic poets from the pejorative 'academic' tag, pithily pointing out that Pound, the most academic of poets, spent little time in academia simply because 'they *threw* him out', [Butts, 6] and that Cummings wrote in sonnets while disguising his fidelity to traditional form by typographical means [ibid.,7]. In another interview, he and the interviewer note the academic qualifications of such as Olson, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and Snyder [Butts, 64]. On his own compositional methods, he makes it clear that it is not his method to write poems to a pre-selected stanzaic form or rhyme pattern, but that the 'rhythm of the utterance' leads by intuition and luck to the right form for it. He disclaims any antipathy toward free verse, saying only by way of criticism (citing Milton's nine-line fall of Satan in *Paradise Lost*) that free verse lacks the expectation of form and the corresponding power to suspend or gratify that expectation. More cuttingly, Wilbur says in the same interview:

When people who are averse on principle to formal verse of any kind light into me,  
I feel they are prevented by their prejudice from distinguishing mere doily-making,  
mere fulfillment of arbitrary form, from the expressive use of the form [Butts, 6].

*Mere doily-making*: the distaste is palpable. Freedom to choose form, so be it form, is coupled with freedom to be arcanelly allusive:

I refuse to be done out of the privilege of referring to Hephaestus if I like.  
If that's what I want to say, I will refer to Hephaestus, regardless of whether  
a large part of the population of southern California doesn't know who  
Hephaestus is—for economy's sake, for the sake of saying with point and  
resonance what you want to say. [Butts, 11]

*Saying with point and resonance* might be opposite, in relief, of mere doily-making. As for  
being abstuse and recondite—and his use of notes where he is—Wilbur replied breezily to  
the *New York Quarterly's* question in 1972:

it would be wretched economy to build all one's information into a poem  
[Butts, 88].

Questioned on another occasion about his apparent hearkening back to antique forms  
—in the Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre of his poems: “Junk” and “Lilacs”—Wilbur said,  
flatly:

I don't write exercises. I let the poem, as it comes out, find what form it's after  
[Butts, 56].

and:

Some of my poems have been mistaken for exercises, to my sorrow; but I have never  
meant to do that sort of thing. I don't like to write simply in order to have used a meter,  
or a certain form [Butts, 33].

In *Responses*, he insists on the organic nature of his compositional method:

No poem of mine is ever undertaken as a technical experiment; the form which it takes,  
whether conventional or innovating, develops naturally as the poem develops, as a  
part of the utterance. Nor does my poem ever begin as the statement of a fully grasped  
idea; I think inside my lines and the thought must get where it can amongst the moods  
and sounds and gravitating particulars which are appearing there [p.118.].

That passage is from piece written at Howard Nemerov's behest, some time before 1966.  
Robert Graves, in 1962, had said: ‘A poem always chooses its own metre’ [O'Prey, 382],  
and Wilbur is an admirer of Graves (cf. Butts, 124, 203). Does the admiration for Graves  
include Graves's early, end-stopped, full-rhyming poetry; as direct as Wilbur's is oblique?  
One might compare Graves's single riddle on “The Blue-Fly” [*Cmp.P.* 454-5] with the  
skein

of surreal allusions in Wilbur's caddis-fly “Water Walker” [*NCP* 338-40]. Earlier in the  
same passage, Wilbur is at pains to stress the autonomy of each of his poems. In the  
Fitzgerald/ Heyen interview in Butts, he dares criticize Yeats to make the point:

I never make a book, in the sense that a poet such as William Butler Yeats  
made a book. For him a book was a set of related poems. You have a strong

feeling, looking through a Yeats book, that he's written a few of the poems purely to complete a pattern. With me, a book is simply the clutter of poems which have accumulated over a certain number of years [Butts, 56-7].

In this interview also, in answer to the question "who do you think are the finest poets writing in America today", Wilbur named J.V. Cunningham, William Meredith and, foremost, Howard Nemerov. In an interview with Philip Dacey for *Crazy Horse* in 1974, Wilbur expressed dismay that the English poet, Geoffrey Hill, at that point lacked an American publisher, and added a wish that his own students would read more of 'the likes of Graves, Larkin, and Nemerov' [Butts, p.124]. In a 1966 interview with Paul Mcknight and Gary Houston [Butts, ...], Wilbur is his own critic on the subject of his early poetry:

About the time I was starting to write poems, the influence of the "new criticism" was very strong, and there was a great, general relish in the academies and among critics and students for poetry of maximum density, maximum irony, maximum ambiguity. Now, that kind of poetry is not necessarily capable of good dramatic performance... some of my early poems are written with a tin ear or no ear at all. I was interested in the words, in the interaction of the words, but not in the dramatic tone of the poem and with no

interest

in the matter of articulation. I've got some terrible clots of consonants in my early poems... [Butts, 40].

The steady gaze at things, at situations in stasis, which characterises his poetry, is to be inferred from a remark on Pound, in a 1964 interview given to Robert Frank and Stephen Mitchell:

The trouble with Pound is that he has, for all of his virtues, a kind of cranky emotional dryness, and doesn't seem to me to be interested enough in things.

[Butts, 35]

Wilbur returns to the question of "thingness" in a 1968 interview, with Joan Hutton:

A lot of my poems, like the one having to do with laundry as angels, are arguments against a thingless, an earthless kind of imagination, or spirituality.

...I find myself totally unprepared to admire psychedelic visions, for example.

I like resistance. I like it in art... And I like the world to resist my ordering of it.

[Butts, 50-1]

Even where the psychedelic—presumably, of the 'flower-power' era—is not in question, the construction of poetry as an alternative reality is, equally, unacceptable:

I don't see how there can be a supreme fiction which lacks ethical content.

[Butts, 52]

Wilbur takes issue with Stevens here, quoting the closing lines of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"—on the soldier gladly dying with 'proper words' or living 'on the bread

of faithful speech', as having the ring of collective values and duty; and suggests a contradiction in socially detached thinglessness.

Questions about the social role of a poet are inevitable in the interviews given in the late sixties against a background of rising disquiet about America's role in Vietnam. From the Paul F. Cummins interview of 1967 'I have Robert Frost's preference for writing about inextinguishable woes rather than merely complaining' [Butts, 43]. 'In any case', he adds, in the Philip Dacey *Crazy Horse* interview, 'Grousing is not the mood of any art which is doing its job' [Butts, 121]. He does endorse a social role for the poet, and in the Joan Hutton interview of 1968, cited above, had said:

if you think... of the poet as agent of society and as servant of the language, why, then, what the poet does all the time is to see what ideas and words are alive, and, insofar as he can, to go right to the center of the words that represent the things that are vexing us... You don't necessarily read a poem and pick up the telephone. But something you might call "tonalizing" does occur, a preparation to feel in a certain way, and consequently to act in a certain way [Butts, 52-3].

In the same interview, Wilbur deals with his much-studied reputation as a 'religious' poet:

I've always felt, and annoyingly said, that poetry is essentially religious in its direction... poetry being a kind of truth-telling... to insist, as all poets do, that all things are related to each other, comparable to each other, is to go toward making an assertion of the unity of all things [Butts, 53-4].

The unity of all things does not make a poem amenable to all theories, as is clear from the *New York Quarterly* interview of 1972:

I'm not in the least disposed to impose archetypal, Freudian or other patterns on the poems we read. In general my attitude about criticism and about teaching is that you look at the thing and see what it wants you to say about it [Butts, 96].

In the same vein, from the Philip Dacey interview,

What we need in any period is strong single talents producing not theories but poems [Butts, 123].

George Garret's striking phrase, "the lithe but coiled fury of his chosen reticence", referred to Wilbur's physical demeanour but was clearly meant, by extension, to be descriptive of his poetry as well.<sup>17</sup> The object of this fury is not other people, or institutions, but that resistance of the world to the way the poet would order it:

From the very beginning, I've thought of poetry as getting one's various selves to quarrel intelligibly in public [Butts, 136].

17. Garret, G., in Butts: *Conversations*, p.102.

In a 1985 interview he confesses to a determination to become a little more authoritarian in his insistence that his students acquire at least a rudimentary competence in formal structures. Pronouncing on postmodern poetry he says:

If you picked up the latest issue of the average poetry periodical nowadays, you'd find for the most part a density of language which is approximately that of prose. ...I look for the unparaphrasable; too many poems are now being written which are their own paraphrases.

[Butts, 227; interview with Nancy L. Bunge]

Not a call to formal measures for their own sake, but for ingenuity in expression which such measures call forth. Earlier in the same interview he had recalled Auden's wry observations to the effect that the most promising thing in a young writer was a hankering to play around with words and the most unpromising, a rush to express ideas. The consistency evident in Wilbur's responses throughout a succession of literary interrogations and his disarming disclaimers of any profound project in poetics leave one, as he himself has suggested, with no option but to return to the words themselves.

## CHAPTER II

### A CONFLICT WITH DISORDER

the beautiful changes  
/  
Wishing ever to sunder  
Things and things' selves for a second finding,  
*The Beautiful Changes* [NCP 392]

With these lines in the title poem of his first collection, Wilbur announced his project to be ever in quest of a second finding. His fidelity to that quest has invited scorn at what has frequently been misunderstood as a preoccupation with metaphysical conceits without the advancement of corresponding religious or philosophical convictions, though he clearly has, as Anthony Hecht has said, a philosophic bent and a religious temper.<sup>18</sup> His fidelity to formal measure and his impatience with confessionism are both encoded in the playful defense of metaphor that is the ostensible matter of the second poem of the collection:

Does sense so stale that it must needs derange  
The world to know it?  
*Praise in Summer* [NCP 391]

Wilbur would have poetry surmount disordered experience, not merely present it.

Obscurely yet most surely called to praise  
[ibid.]

In that first line of the poem is Wilbur's pledge of allegiance: to the work of patrolling the same thin atmospheres of the imagination as Stevens had, but with positive affirmation of the worth of lived life and of the things that give substantiality to life. His patience with his material would drive Randall Jarrell, in exasperation, to offer to 'pay dollars' for a dramatic monologue from Wilbur, if only, one presumes, it would display a little Browning wickedness.<sup>19</sup> Dramatic monologues did follow. Jarrell did not live to comment on them.

The foil that order and restraint lends to beauty is acknowledged again in a line in the third poem, "Caserta Garden" [NCP 389]—if in the poem itself, the line points to the cost of rarity in privilege and exclusivity:

How beauties will grow richer walled about!

Here Wilbur, who is hereafter much concerned with things of the mind, is much less metaphysical than Marvell, and in no way attempts to annihilate all that's made to a 'green Thought in a green Shade'. Wilbur's garden is just that, and immures the mind of one

18. Hecht, A., "The Motions of the Mind". *TLS*. May 20, 1977, in Salinger (1983) p.123.

19. Jarrell, R. *Poetry and the Age*. New York: Vintage Books (1955) pp.227-230

immured in it. The analogy of the wider garden of the world is inevitable, given the wartime circumstances in which the poet beholds Caserta. Breslin(1984), in citing this poem as anthithetical to ‘contemporary’ poems, which he defines as remaining open and in process [pp.61], appears to misread the poetic purpose for which the garden is created.

Wilbur’s

Caserta, bombed, as it happens, in WWII, is formulated as it is solely in order to set up the conundrum of the last stanza:

The garden of the world, which no one sees,  
Never had walls, is fugitive with lives;  
Its shapes escape our simpler symmetries;  
There is no resting where it rots and thrives.  
[NCP 390]

As in “The Regatta” [NCP 378-9], ‘Freedom’s a pattern’. There is, however, a Yankee rebel in the young Wilbur. In “Winter Spring” he flatly declares:

But I am weary of  
The winter way of loving things for reasons.  
[NCP 382]

The freedom of the mind to roam within the aesthetic halls of the mind is just as vigorously defended here as any corresponding freedom of a Modernist to rake among its outhouses.

The ninth poem in the first collection, in Wilbur’s own reverse chronology of the *New and Collected Poems*, the Hopkinesque “Poplar, Sycamore” (though declaring itself so with ‘invisible quotation marks’)<sup>20</sup> makes yet another flat, anti-rationalist declaration.

My eye will never know the dry disease  
Of thinking things no more than what he sees.  
[NCP 381]

Wilbur is not usually so direct. The following poem, “Bell Speech”, supplies the Wilburian corollary to anti-rationalist vision: anti-rationalist speech,

Great Paul, great pail of sound, still dip and draw  
Dark speech from the deep and quiet steeple well,  
[NCP 380]

The rest of the stanza supplies the *sense* of Wilbur’s utterance, but these two lines adumbrate that sense with the vague certainty of a Tiepolo ink-wash sketch.

More than speech is drawn from the well of thought; desire to understand what we are and why we are here in the Universe is slaked, but never satisfied, with thought:

All men are born distraught,  
And will not for the world be satisfied.  
Whether we live in fact, or but in thought,  
*Ballade for the Duke of Orleans* [NCP 212]

Drawing an inverse parallel from the production of pastoral poetry by complex urban

20. cf. Bogan, Leithauser; in Salinger, pp. 30, 285.

cultures, Daniel Hoffman has written of Wilbur's first collection that 'only a time of such violence and spiritual uncertainty as our own could encourage the writing of poems like Wilbur's, which hold the dark impulses of the self and the age at bay with civility of outlook and stylistic grace'.<sup>21</sup> That Wilbur's civility and grace have never wavered suggests that, as

he sought order through poetry in the midst of wartime disorder, disordered clamour is exactly what he would choose to avoid in his poetry ever after. This is, in fact, the thesis propounded by Joseph T. Cox, for whom, in a 1997 interview commissioned by the US Air Force Academy's *War, Literature and the Arts* [Vol.10,1]. Cox questioned Wilbur about his comments to Stanley Kunitz that "it was not until World War II took me to Cassino, Anzio, and the Siegfried Line that I began versifying in earnest.", and about the rest of that utterance: "One does not use poetry for its major purposes, as a means of organizing oneself and the world, until one's world somehow gets out of hand." [ibid., 8].

Wilbur dismisses "versifying in earnest" as a "mock-pompous expression" and responds:

In regard to technique and structure and structure, I was not inclined to fall into "the fallacy of imitative form" and write chaotically about chaos. [ibid., 10]

This late repetition of Yvor Winters' caveat can by extension be applied to all Wilbur's poetry; to the resistance to confessionalism, to restraint on Vietnam, to the distaste for "Beat" poetry. In Wilbur's war we must expect to find less, and more; certainly less Wilfrid Owen. Wilbur is of the opinion [in the Cox interview] that good World War II poetry did not "prettify or ennoble war, and did not on the other hand repudiate it in horror, as much World War I poetry had done". In place of overt war imagery, there is more of the 'conflict with disorder' as he defines it in "The Genie in the Bottle". In the war poems, one looks not for war poems, but for the Wilbur poem. It is to be found, at its oblique best, in the characteristically understated "Potato" [NCP 345]. "Comical-delicate," Cox calls this poem, noting that Wilbur's sense of the paradox of his war experience is present, true to Cleanth Brooks' insistence that paradox is the fundamental element of poetic language [Cox, "Versifying in Earnest", *WLA*, 10:1, pp.41]. Lines laced with paradox are what Wilbur serves up:

Simple as soil yet crowded as earth with all.

The ear hears *with all* elide into a Shakespearean 'withal', enhancing the paradox.

Sharper sensations follow:

Cut open raw, it looses a cool clean stench,

21. Hoffman, D., (1979) *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, p. 473.

/

It is like breaching a strangely refreshing tomb:

What is found within is straight out of the *Germania*:

Therein the taste of first stones, the hands of dead slaves,  
Waters men drank in the earliest frightful woods,  
Flint chips, and peat, and the cinders of buried camps.

Earthy symbols follow thick and fast, as potatoes tumbling from a sack: ‘the planet skin’; ‘the plain insides’; ‘the white’s blue-hearted’. The blue-hearted, true-hearted ‘mean earth-apples’ are partaken of in common Eucharist by ‘the Sikh and the Senegalese, / Hobo, and Okie’. In the slipped syntax ‘the body of Jesus the Jew’ is itself eaten in the form of the potato. Following this, the last stanza is a sacramental affirmation:

What has not lost its savor shall hold us up,  
And we are praising what saves us, what fills the need.  
(Soon there’ll be packets again, with Algerian fruits.)  
[NCP 345]

While it does not relate to ‘saviour’, *savour* includes ‘reputation’ in its etymology, thereby worth, true values, the good, truth. This is what ‘saves’ us and fills the spiritual need. The return of luxury and sensuousness is hedged in that last line with a hint of regret, almost. *Package* is the usual US or Canadian word, so ‘packets’ must indicate packet boat; bearer of mail, passengers, and the resumption of human commerce. The poem, Wilbur tells Cox, was ‘graciously declined’ by the English magazine *Horizon*.

Not order restored to the world at large, but contemplation of the illusory image of peace and order after a battlefield snowfall is the study of “First Snow in Alsace” [NCP 347]. The first four tercets treat with the visual, imagist contrast between tranquil appearance and the underlying mangled reality; with the appearance of order superimposed on utter disorder. The latter half of the poem deals with the human shock of transformed perceptive norms on humans: on the newly dead, shrouded in snow; on the surprise, fear and relief of recognition in the encounters of figures in Winter camouflage; of the unchanging wonder of frost designs on windowpanes, for children; on the boyish elation of a young soldier “ten first-snows back in thought”. The last image is the exact verbal equivalent of a Norman Rockwell painting, as Clive James [Salinger, 112] puts it. All the more effective for the deadly context in which Wilbur employs it.

“Mined Country” [NCP 343-4], with its improbable Spenserian sensitivities is also, as Jewel Spears Brooker points out from the pun in the title (“mind country”), an alternative place created by the tutored imagination [WLA, 10.I, pp.59-60]. The violence done to our trust in the innocence of nature by its abuse as camouflage for mortal harm is

psychologically wounding. The metre, too, is off-balance (Brooker notes that the random beats of its sprung rhythm mimic the unpredictability of land mines). James Longenbach counts it as one of Wilbur's explicitly political poems [op.cit., 68]. When the first line speaks of the retreating Germans 'gone into the gray hills quilled with birches' the ears prick up at the odd choice of word. Stanzas taper to observations made with narrowed eyes:

But it's going to be long before  
Their war's gone for good.  
  
/  
Some scheme's gone awry.  
  
/  
We thought woods were wise but never  
Implicated, never involved.  
  
/  
Shepherds must learn a new language; this  
Isn't going to be quickly solved.  
[NCP 343]

The defensive quills are also the pens of apologists. Blatantly opposed systems of thought had formed wartime pacts and alliances. The order of a whole hemisphere had been in contention. Wilbur's post-war prescription is cautious:

...to trust things alike and never to stop  
Emptying things, but not let them lack  
Love in some manner restored; ...  
[NCP 344]

Breslin (1984), reviewing *The Beautiful Changes*, thinks that, like Lowell, the young Wilbur sought the challenge of difficult forms (while conceding that Wilbur's forms are 'not violently thrust upon the material as Lowell's are'), and points to fourteen poems in quatrains, three in terza rima, two sonnets, and 'three poems in which rhyming takes place between the same lines of succeeding stanzas'[pp.34]. James G. Southworth, on the other hand, appraising Wilbur's *Poems 1943-1956*, a volume spanning Wilbur's first three published collections, identified at least 66 different stanza forms and calculated that among 118 poems, 17 were purely rhythmical, 54 metrical only if the rhetorical sense was subordinated, and 6 were amenable to metrical or rhythmical reading. Southworth claims for Wilbur that:

What he has done is to bring an essentially rhythmical prosody within the limits of a metrical one. ...has restored to metrical poetry the subtlety that was being squeezed out of it as the iambic foot gained dominance.<sup>22</sup>

22. Southworth, J.G., *College English*, October 1960, pp. 24-9.

That two-thirds of the poet's output to that point exhibits a predominance of rhythmical over metrical and that nonce stanza forms proliferate would seem to bear out what the poet himself has claimed in various interviews and essays: that his poems choose their own forms. Anthony Hecht, invited to concur with this view, shared by Frost and Wilbur; or rather, with a simpler expression of it quoted from a Wilbur contribution to *The Formalist*, rejects the 'doily-making' engagement with form-as-challenge condemned by Wilbur himself, but does utter a caution about form's traditional link with content [cf. Hoy, 1999, 87-9]. Wilbur takes form out of the equation, once mastery of it may be presumed:

I hope I have written some poems that are successful in respect to completely consuming the form and turning it wholly to expressive purposes. [Butts, 6]

Southworth notes in particular that Wilbur 'uses the device of alliteration well, making it subtly visible everywhere'. In "Junk", Wilbur's most famous demonstration of this, Hecht's objection is answered by the tumbling catalogue of content bulldozed down the page by the staggered hemistichs of the Anglo-Saxon line. The content fits the form of the poem very well. The matter of the poem is quite a different matter. Wilbur's disarming profession of a simple liking for Anglo-Saxon rhythm suggests that craft was aided in this instance by happy inspiration:

I took both Anglo-Saxon and Beowulf at Harvard school. I was the odd one who liked those courses. I love the Anglo-Saxon language and find the rhythms of the alliterative line very catchy [Butts, 56].

There may be an occasional lapse, as noted by Southworth, such as the unfortunate alliterating pun of 'The Luftwaffe waft' in "The Peace of Cities" [NCP 351], and the blatant assonance of habetude/hebetude in "Grace" [NCP 384]—but these are, after all, early poems. Concluding his examination of Wilbur's technical virtues, Southworth says: 'The important thing, however, is his sense that rhythm—the inner harmony of the line—is more important than the easier device of rhyme' [ibid.]. This is not to downplay the importance that Wilbur does attach to rhyme: 'rhyme can be a great liberator of the unconscious. ...properly used, a great liberator of the mind' [Butts 74]. More technically, in his foreword to Dacey and Jauss's *Strong Measures*, from 1986: 'good rhyme is not ornament but emphasis, ligature, and significant sound'.

Having demonstrated, through an analysis the first stanza of "Conjuration" [NCP 282] how, through interweaving alliteration and the use of nasals, liquids and short vowels, the poem becomes one 'where thought and expression are one', Southworth finds on a third

reading ‘certain basic weaknesses’. The density of expression has concealed a lack, a ‘short-sightedness of vision’. Noting that ‘love as a subject occurs less frequently in Wilbur’s poems than it does in the work of most young poets’, Southworth asks for—and quotes Wilbur himself in support of his demand—‘a periodic acquaintance with the threat of chaos’. Already, Southworth notes, ‘Imagination as a subject occurs less frequently in Wilbur’s later poems’, and this is of concern since in the earlier work of the poet ‘the use and power of imagination motivate at least ten poems’ [ibid., 27]. In 1960 it would have been premature to remark that a poet who had married his college sweetheart and remained married to her for upwards of forty years was not the man one might expect to speak much of the angst of youthful love. The imputation that faultless technique could not also embody confrontation with passion or with chaos needs to be validated in the light of the wider debate about formalism.

In the collections after 1956, a sprightly continuing catholicity of form testifies to the self-declared autonomy which Wilbur claims for each of his poems. *Advice to a Prophet* (1961) includes the now-famous revival of Anglo-Saxon accentual hemistichs in “Junk”, a perfect “Ballade for the Duke of Orleans”, as well as the pair of fourteen-line, three-stress stanzas with separate and shifting rhyme-schemes in one of Wilbur’s few love poems, “Someone Talking to Himself”. *Walking to Sleep* (1969), includes a rondeau for Kathleen Raine, non-metric, quantitative unrhymed syllabics in quantitative verse of the elegy for Dudley Fitts, and rhyming syllabic quatrains in “A Late Aubade”. The cultural borrowing of Haiku-pattern stanzas for “Thyme Flowering Among Rocks” is, thanks to Imagism, less strange to the ear and eye than the reappearance of accentual Anglo-Saxon. Here, ‘lost to proper scale’ [NCP 143] is a botanic Lilliput of Haiku still life: contemplation compressed. In the same collection, varied applications of the staple four-line stanza are notable: unrhyming and metrically irregular in “Complaint”, slapping spondees in I and II of “Running”, breath-length lines in III [cf. Michelson 133], and pulsating *abba* in “Playboy”. Mary S. Mattfield, seeing a pattern in these technical variations, finds evidence for the “plainer and more straightforward language” claimed by Wilbur himself (in *Responses*, 118) in the ‘lessening in the number of intricately-shaped, cleverly-rhyming six-line stanzas, an increasing number of quatrains’. In reinforcement of this, Mattfield points out that in “Lilacs” which, like “Junk”, uses the Old English alliterating pattern, the language is colloquial and the phrasing commonplace proverbial, proving that mastery of form implies none of preciosity attributed to Wilbur [cf. Mattfield: “Some Poems of Richard Wilbur”]. It may be that Wilbur came to share the scepticism of his contemporary Anthony Hecht

who, while revering Herbert, was first enamoured of the poetry of Donne, ‘whose poems are filled with jostling paradox and ironic self-contradiction, and which were, moreover, highly dramatic’ [Hoy, 71]. Hecht is rather damning of the subject of the ironic, meditative lyric:

I’ve looked up some definitions in poetry handbooks, ...The lyric was understood to be instant of perception captured in the course of its fleeting evanescence; it was a rapid sketch of some state of the soul, a hasty impression of the receptive mind, ...A good deal of lousy poetry was written on this principle [Hoy, 70-1].

Wilbur’s is not the poetry of rapid sketches or hasty impressions, even where it contrives to look like such, and Wilbur’s compositional process is, on his own admission, notoriously slow. Although he claims to write slowly, advancing one line at a time, he does make and preserve drafts of stanzas and has released some for publication: of “Driftwood”, for John Frederick Nims’ *A Critical Supplement to Poetry* (1948), of “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” for Anthony Ostroff’s *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (1964), and full drafts of Part I of “The Eye” for Alberta T. Turner’s *Fifty Contemporary Poets* (1977). These latter drafts are typewritten, and notable for the word-substitution tables scribbled in clusters in the margin; the clustered afterthoughts drifting downwards in the text as draft succeeds draft. The process at first sight appears to belie Wilbur’s own description of it: he writes that his poems generally proceed ‘step by step, the lines grudgingly put down and thereafter little altered’ [Turner, *ibid.*, p.336].

James Longenbach wittily quotes an excerpt from a Wilbur criticism of John Heath Stubbs which ends by saying ‘if this be the new decorum, I suggest we scoot back to modernism!’ The point being that Wilbur himself has borrowed freely from modernism, the ultimate point for Longenbach being that ‘Wilbur’s best writing comes in response to the events of his time’.<sup>23</sup> Longenbach also supplies this perspective:

The poems of Ashbery and Wilbur are shaped by a keen awareness of what is at stake in writing after Eliot and Stevens; their very different styles embody equally legitimate responses to modernism. And inasmuch as Ashbery and Wilbur are both deeply skeptical of the attribution of social power to any particular form, the two poets have a great deal in common [Modern Poetry after Modernism, p.9].

Mark Doty, however, draws a clear distinction between the two,<sup>24</sup> explaining that Ashbery in his 1956 collection *Some Trees* employed traditional and rather arcane forms—the sestina, the canzone, the pantoum—while avoiding referentiality, and thereby subverting, for one thing, Wilbur’s assertions on form as contained in his “Genie in the Bottle” essay in

John Ciardi's *Mid Century American Poets* (1950):

23. Longenbach, J., (1997) *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, pp. 65-6, 79.

24. Myers and Wojahn, *A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, pp.147.

the use of strict poetic forms, traditional or invented, is like the use of framing and composition in painting: both serve to limit the work of art, and to declare its artificiality: they say, 'this is not the world, but a pattern imposed upon the world or found in it [quoted in Hill (1967), pp.89-90].

After deploring the visual disruption of syntactical expectations which he sees as particularly evident in the poems of Ammons and Creeley—attributing this fault to an over-reliance on enjambment at the expense of 'irony, paradox and ambiguity... intellectual answers to various linguistic shortfalls', Wyatt Prunty lauds Richard Wilbur's skill with language: 'the greater the skill Wilbur has with language, the greater is his plumbing of our central riddle, time'. Prunty adds:

Wilbur's work is fully confrontational. It refuses to let one side of choice preclude the other merely for the sake of aesthetic closure.<sup>25</sup>

Prunty would seem, however, to be referring to Wilbur's continuing examination of the mind's grip on reality and of the mind's power to constitute reality. In these figurative test-beds of cognitive experience, set in wood, cave, pond, and churchyard ("Ceremony", "Mind", "Marginalia", "Water Walker", "In a Churchyard") what is at stake requires in itself no irrevocable commitment on the speaker's part, but does demand that we, the reader, confront the consequences of the same speculations. If successful, the poet thereby alters our perceptive habits.

#### THE WILBUR MANIFESTO

The *New Poems* may also contain what may prove to be Wilbur's manifesto on poetry, eighty-five lines of blank verse devoted to the business of poetry, that is, the business of distortion that has the truth always in view. In *Some Notes on "Lying"* [*The Catbird's Song*, 135-42] Wilbur has written the manifesto for "Lying" [*NCP* 9-11] and, by extension, for all his poetry. The piece is, he says, 'a poem about truth and poetry'. The "Notes" proceed to comment definitively on poetry and on that particular poem, which Wilbur then presents, as a masterwork as it were, for critical inspection:

The poet is prone to the illusion that he can make or unmake the world, or create an alternative reality. This he cannot do... what he *can* do—interact with the given world, see and feel and order it newly. . . .I would wish to deal fluently and amply. . . .with the world

as a dense tissue of resemblances. . . .The poem assumes that the essential poetic act is the discovery of resemblance, the making of metaphor, and that, the world being one thing, all metaphor tends toward the truth. [Berg, op.cit., 302-3]

25. Prunty, W., (1990) *Fallen From the Symbolized World*, pp. 65-6, 120-1.

As to the tone of the poem, Wilbur avers that:

Comedy is serious; it is the voice of balance; and its presence in a serious poem is a test and earnest of its earnestness.

As for blank verse:

pentameter is the most flexible of our meters, and the best in which to build large verse-masses.

Then, a blunt challenge to the reader:

What I would most respond to, in conversation with an interested reader, would be noticings of details: the use of birds throughout, and of the word “shrug” for the hovering of an unreal grackle; the echo of Job, and its intended evocation of a whole passage; the water-figure, strange but not untrue, in which the idea of “nothing” is dismissed; the transformation of the *black mist* into a rainbow; the perching of the catbird on a mock-orange spray; the vitrification of a river, beginning with “glazes” and ending with “cullett.” [Berg, *ibid.*, 304]

This remarkable passage, catches the tenor of Wilbur’s engagement with poetry—a poetry of intricate, interlaced carvings, all inseparable from a common, grand theme, but any one piece worthy of its master. Wilbur can express that better, of course, and does:

what we have here, I figure, is a baroque poem, a busy and intricate contraption which issues in plainness. [*ibid.*]

Which *issues in plainness*. That intricate ‘plainness’ is what Wilbur admirers so admire: ‘To claim, at a dead party, to have spotted a grackle’, yes, where the ‘beaked ladle plies the chuckling ice’, we chuckle at the clever allusion. A suggestion of crookedness in *beaked* invites us to share in the deception. The catbird, which has no birdsong of its own, is emblem of our cruel human passion for mimicry:

What, though for pain there is no other word,  
Finds pleasure in the cruellest simile?

[NCP 10]

The dove, symbol of innocence, is also the Holy Spirit: ‘the dove who hatched the dove-tailed world’, the pun on carpentry alluding to the carpenter’s Son. The poem ends, as Wilbur says, with ‘three’fictions having one burden’: the *Song of Roland*, exposed for an exemplary great lie, ‘told with the eyes half-shut’—as a painter’s eyes are, when registering the tonal values of a scene; the Eden story, and the story of Chiron and Achilles. Those

three stories are, in fact, summed up in the last fifteen lines of the poem. “Lying”, Wilbur writes,

because it is urging the unity of things, expresses the idea [of all metaphor tending intrinsically toward truth] not only by near comparisons and far linkages, but also by a certain velocity—by quick shifts and transitions.

The body of the poem, containing the argument that justifies the fifteen-line conclusion, divides up into scenes. The ‘party’ scene, or conceit, occupies lines 1 through 14. The ‘fierce velleity’ of line 14 is an oxymoron too insistent not to be recognizable as a common feeling: that indefinable seven-year-itch of the spirit. Lines 15 through 35 defend grackle-spotting as a necessary stratagem in the face of everyday unseeingness of all that we fail to raise up our eyes to, to gold crosses and cornices no more than the ventilator-grill on the diner roof. To steal into twenty lines one about the morning stones ‘Beginning now to rein their shadows in’ were excuse enough for the other nineteen. The presence of such breathtakingly original anthropomorphisms can distract from the wily argument into which they are woven:

...In the strict sense, of course,  
We invent nothing,  
/  
And so with that most rare conception, nothing.  
What is it, after all, but something missed?

Praise of Creation is, appropriately, expressed by its very denial, in the Miltonic person of Satan, a creature of insubstantiality, who yet leaves behind in Eden his back-projected sky-shadow that is the rainbow’s foil. From line 47, perception on the domestic horizon is tested. The ‘shucked tunic of an onion’ is so laughably improbable as to prove the maxim in ‘Odd that a thing is most itself when likened’. The anthropological oddity that made one creature mimic another genus attunes our ear more carefully. We smile and learn from having been once deceived, as the Aristotelian mimesis in the poem holds up true pictures to us in a distorting mirror. A demonstration piece, virtually, of Wilbur’s work, not a line wasted. Why should not one take the trouble to look up ‘cullet’? Anthony Hecht, adjudging it the finest poem in the *New Poems* collection, sees it as confronting the axiom that art itself is a lie of sorts, *a la* Touchstone: “The truest poetry is the most feigning”.<sup>26</sup> Most revealing, too, is a comparison with Auden’s eponymous poem from the same quotation. Where Wilbur’s poem abrasively rubs up against the sharp detail of things: ‘...the shucked tunic of an onion, / Brushed to one side on a backlit chopping board’; ‘A tarp torn loose and in the groaning wind / Now puffed, now flattened...’, Auden’s after much tongue-in-

cheek witty cynicism about man and poet, ‘The only creature ever made who fakes’, delivers the same message:

26. Hecht, A., “Master of Metaphor”. *The New Republic*. May 16, 1988, p.30.

What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,  
Can trick his lying nature into saying  
That love, or truth in any serious sense,  
Like orthodoxy, is a reticence?

[CP 621]

Wilbur, by contrast, studs his message hard-edged imagery: ‘The river glazes toward the dam and spills / To the drubbed rocks below its crashing cullet’. In ‘bashing itself against the reality of things’ [*Responses*, 217] “Lying” makes things: natural forms, artefacts, invoke their own metaphysics of insistent association just as the repeated fiction of the *Chanson de Roland* writes a larger truth.

#### PAST MASTERS

The variety of Wilbur’s subject range is revealing of the searching sweep of his gaze. Life, existence, and humankind’s short tenure and incomplete possession of them is examined again and again. Andrew Mellon’s imputed wish to occupy that Dutch courtyard of Pieter de Hoogh [*NCP* 362] may stand for our wish save the past, spend the present and compound both in our future. We would evict those tenants, quaff that beer, be the objects of that smile. In the preceding poem, “Objects” [*NCP* 360], the same painter’s eye-deceiving skill is matched by Wilbur’s deft word-strokes:

...see feinting from his plot of paint  
The trench of light on boards  
/  
And sun submerged in beer...  
...the careful and undulant tile. A quick  
Change of the eye and all this calmly passes

The pun on the stationer’s feint, on the artist’s perspective grid in *plot* of paint, on trencher in the *trench* of light, and the preparatory *undulant*—so antithetically applied to *tile*—add up to a concentrated example of Wilbur’s uncanny ability, through inversion, to raise the perceived sense of objects to a root power. In “Giacometti” [*NCP* 330], Michaelangelo’s concept of releasing the shape within the stone is reversed and the rock’s ‘fierce composure’ is captive in the shape of man as the man is captive in the rock. ‘Filling ourselves as sculpture / Fills the stone’ is a late inversion on this inversion [“Leaving”, *NCP* 16]. The gaunt, upward gazing Giacometti figures are ‘walking, walking, many and alone’ as the crowd that flowed over London Bridge. They provide Wilbur, for once, with ready-made existentialist gestalts:

This is the single form we can assume.

We are this man unspeakably alone  
/  
This starless walker, one who cannot guess  
His will, his keel his nose's bony blade.  
[NCP 331]

This is the flesh gone 'in enquiring of the bone'. The poet cannot go beyond what Giacometti has said; endorses rather, the same spare, acetylene viewpoint. And yet, can celebrate in "Beowulf" [NCP 316-7] the heathen faith of northern Europe from which his own Anglicanism stems. Here, indeed, as Edgecombe succinctly puts it, is epic compressed into lyric.<sup>27</sup> By making the imitation of epic-mode repetitions a structural feature of his poem Wilbur demonstrates, equally succinctly, just how narratively effective are the repetitions and digressions in the original. What may read as 'token homage to the repetitions of the epic mode' [Edgecombe, *ibid.*] heightened with twice-used epanorthosis: "...the people were strange, were strangely warm. / ...the people were strange, the people strangely cold" recreates successfully the dark mood of the original and the sense of peoples slashing a way to the light from out the pagan dark. Beowulf discharges a debt of honour to Hrothgar, who had paid the Wergeld of Beowulf's father. Right and reward, wrong and remedy, are not yet adjudicated on through the agency of the powerful mediaeval church. Reward is a measure of honour and is left in the ground with the one who earned it, betokening his share of rewards in the afterlife. The confused time of transition from the old beliefs to the new, from the assured battle-readiness of the Germanic gods to the less tangible protection of the new God of light, are well conveyed in the oddly phrased repetitions, and by the oddly flat statement of the fact at the close of the second stanza:

...in all was a vagueness and a strain,  
Because they lived in a land of daily harm.  
And they said the same things again and again.

Wilbur's seven sestets paraphrase the spirit of the original's closing sequence:

*Þá ymbe hlæw riodan hilde-déore*  
*æþelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,*  
*woldon ceare cwīðan, kyning mænan*  
/  
*cwædon Þæt he wære wyruld-cyninga,*  
*manna mildust ond mon-ðwærust,*  
*leodum liðost ond lof-geornost.*

*Then about the mound rode brave-in-*  
*battle*  
*The children of princes, twelve in all,*  
*Wished their sorrow to utter, their king*  
*bewail*  
/  
*they said that he was among world kings*  
*the gentlest of men and the man most*  
*courteous;*  
*to his people the kindest, and of good*  
*repute the most yearning.*

They buried him next the sea on a thrust of land:  
Twelve men rode round his barrow all in a ring,  
Singing of him what they could understand.

27. Edgecombe, R. *A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Richard Wilbur*, pp.55.

More than Wilbur's affection for the Anglo-Saxon is at play here, as both Edgecombe and Michelson differently suggest [Edgecombe, *ibid.*, 55]. The surreal and jarring depictions of the landscape in stanzas one and five are extraneous to the original where, notably in the landscape of the mere (lines 1357-, 1414-), detailed topographical description is used to create a coherent effect. So, too, 'The Roman road lay paved too shiningly / For a road so many men had travelled on' [cf. Beowulf, 320: *Stræt wæs stán-fáh*] may be a possible oblique reference to the the Roman road that led to the Reformation, or just a dream-like image. Or, we may accept Michelson's implicit contention that the nightmarish rendering of the original is a coded argument against Poe's excessive dream-poetics [Edgecombe, *ibid.*]. Wilbur has said 'A poem should not be like a Double-Crostic, it should not be the sort of puzzle in which you get nothing until you get it all' [*Responses*, p.31]. For five stanzas the poem has the quality of troubled dream in measure more than is needed to convey the sense of the original. The overlay of dream-consciousness is pointed, and must encode some twentieth-century psychological message:

It was a childish country; and a child,  
Grown monstrous, so besieged them in the night  
That all their daytimes were a dream of fright  
[NCP 316]

Some Grendel-child frightens everyone's Jungian daytime dreams. The gentle playfulness with which he exploits his love of words, however darkly here, is one of the pleasures of reading Wilbur.

#### SUBJECT V. MATTER

A recent anthology, *Daughters*, edited by a feminist poet and devoted to the treatment of daughters in poetry, commandeers Wilbur's "The Writer" to make up numbers. The instance serves to point up the fact that, in Wilbur, the title or ostensible subject is almost never the *matter* of the poem. That poem is from part one of the 1976 collection: *The Mind Reader*. The poem, and whole section, make a good-enough test sample. The first poem in the section, "A Storm in April" [NCP 52], has already been commented on. The second is "The Writer". Much anthologized, suggesting, in its tercets of anapaestic trimeter and tetrameter [Edgecombe, 125] the clatter of typewriter keys. As Harris [op.cit., 423] points out, two conceits carry the poem's freight: that of the typewriter's sound as a 'chain hauled

over a gunwale’ which, in turn, leads to the inner life of the young writer being conceived of as ‘a great cargo’. The poet himself rejects the ‘easy figure’ of these conceits and substitutes the inspired allegory of the dazed and bewildered starling trying once more to clear the ‘sill of the world’ (that ‘sill’ is used again, in a similar sense, in the fifth but last line of “The Mind Reader”). It seems that “subject” becomes “matter” at just the point where metaphor is abandoned and nature is studied for its teaching allegory. But the young writer, we sense, does not hear the address and is not meant to. This is the poet talking to himself. “A Wedding Toast” [NCP 61] is that, and a life view:

Which is to say that what love sees is true;  
That the world’s fullness is not made but found.  
Life hungers to abound  
And pour its plenty out for such as you.

/  
May you not lack for water,  
And may that water smack of Cana’s wine.

A princely courtesy upon acquiring a daughter-in-law: life, and the full discovery of it.

Impersonal subjects, similarly, are honorary addressees of poetic thought-muster. “A Sketch” [NCP 65-6] is just that—a flitting finch, studied through the viewfinder of a window frame, is mimicked in a metre which hops from iambic trimeter, to monometer, to dimeter. An extra syllable in line three of stanza III allows trochaic substitution, with the aid of a deft pun, to stitch in the patchwork image of ‘cross-hatched / pine-needle dark’. The bird’s darting out of shadow into light, out of sight into hiding, leaves the impression of a sequence of rough sketches; on which the Frostian pronouncement:

I could not choose that one  
Be done  
as the finished thing

Another poem on poetry, on the unfinishable half-formulations that would spoil in the working. From the poet of affirmation, a parable in an old birch tree is predictable enough. The image is also, as one might expect, turned inwards:

Still, do not be too much persuaded. ...  
/  
To think of patterns made from outside-in  
/

Old trees are doomed to annual rebirth,  
New wood, new life, new compass, greater  
girth,  
“A Black Birch in Winter” [NCP 72]

The cross-cut image of *new compass* is the central affirmatory metaphor, contained in semantic modesty within the overt image of *greater girth*. Not far enough? (Jarrell,

RWC 48-50]. Well, the botanical analogy does have parallels in animal life. Romanticist? Hardly; the self is absent from the scene. Should such matter be left to lesser poets—when none can treat it better than the present poet?

A flippant address, “To His Skeleton”, has in it the morbid wit of Herbert’s “Mortification”:

Still, I have held you straight  
And mean to lay you down  
Without too much disgrace  
When what can perish dies.  
[NCP 76]

Since *straight* can stand for moral as well as a physical uprightness, a secular prayer is secreted amid the flippancy, not far in spirit from the Herbert original. The facing poem in *NCP* to “Skeleton” is another apostrophe, “John Chapman” [NCP 77], this time an allegory for American multi-ethnicity. We can have much fun with *virginal frontier* and *rutting wagons* and *girdled glade, need, seed*, but the message is direct: ingrafting is necessary, sooner or later, to prevent degeneracy. A direct address to an American issue, the poem is longer by two stanzas than “Skeleton”; somehow, uncomfortably longer. The Appleseed parable, though unassailable, seems too facile. It is a true, American, parable nonetheless. Are we uncomfortable? Very well, we are uncomfortable!

The last poem in section I of *The Mind Reader* is indirectly apostrophic, and more typically figurative in the Wilbur manner. “Children of Darkness” [NCP 80-1] rehearses the theme of death and renewal, of nourishment in decay:

Their gift is not for life, these creatures who  
Disdain to root,  
/  
..., mimicking the forms which they eschew,  
Make it their pleasure to undo  
  
All that has heart and fiber. ...  
/  
Nowhere does water stand so clear  
  
As in stalked cups where pine has come to grief  
/  
Where coral schools the beech and aspen leaf  
To seethe like fishes of a reef,

There is an echo of Donne’s “A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day”:

For I am every dead thing,  
In whom love wrought new Alchimie  
/  
He ruin’d mee, and I am re-begot  
Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not.

—and of Frost’s lurking inversions in “Spring Pools”:

...up by the roots to bring dark foliage on.  
The trees that have it in their pent-up buds  
To darken nature and be summer woods—

The motif, though not the theme, of Spring and renewal is the frame for “Next Door”:

... . Promptly the trees  
Break bud and startle into leaf,  
... , while all the birds  
Repeal the winter’s grief [NCP 223]

This time, Spring is intrusive, taunting those who will know no Spring, seated as they are—

In the calm, wicker stalls of age.

There is a seemingly chance felicitous echo of Yeats in the elegiac sixth stanza:

Gossip of strong-man, dancer, priest, and all  
They knew who had the gift of life,  
Artisan, lover, soldier, orator,  
Wild bitch and happy wife,  
[ibid.]

—calling to mind ‘The holiness of monks, and after / Porter-drinkers’ randy laughter’ [Yeats, “Under Ben Bulben”]. The subject is that same as Auden’s later “Old People’s Home”. Auden’s poem reproaches us with:

we all know what to expect, but their generation  
is the first to fade like this, not at home but assigned  
to a numbered frequent ward, stowed out of conscience  
as unpopular luggage  
[CP 860]

Wilbur, however, hits upon the startling realization that we do *not* know what to expect: ‘We have no way to know’. The ancients are already beyond our reach, as much as the dead. They ‘project upon a cloudy stage’, like Larkin’s “Old Fools” [CP 196-7] who live ‘Not here and now, but where all happened once’. Larkin may jab home the barb that ‘Well, / We shall find out’, but Wilbur’s thought is the one which really arrests: we shall never *know*. Robert Graves did say of Auden that after emigrating to the United States he developed there his real talent—which was for light verse.<sup>28</sup> Whatever about the justice of that remark, it serves to contrast Wilbur’s treatment of the same subject, same matter, but with different manner. Wilbur’s reproach is direct, too: ‘Must we not see or hear these worn and frail? His answer, insidious nature, permeates the poem. The heedless busyness of the birds is natural; the pricks of conscience, only, are human:

Pitilessly, resolving every sigh  
Or quaver to a chipper trill  
/  
Our lawn is loud with girls and boys.  
The leaves are full and busy with the sun.  
The birds make too much noise.

28. O'Prey (1995) *Robert Graves: Collected Writings on Poetry*, p.235.

A more complex poem than either Auden's or Larkin's, which, in their protest and pity, omit something of the added perspective that Wilbur lends: that decay and disregard *are* natural, if reprehensible.

#### ALLUSIONS AND ALLUSIVENESS

Wilbur has spoken of form as a frame for the artifice of art. The frame is often itself signified by a pose, that of the quirky, eccentric naturalist. His "The Death of a Toad" [NCP 320] may be an animal elegy in the tradition of Cowper's "Epitaph on a Hare", but is much more heavily freighted. The *amphi bios* of Greek antiquity is recalled in the toad's 'antique eyes'. The amphibian represents life's ascent from the sea. His mutilation is paralleled in the horticultural castration of free-seeding grasses; 'haggard daylight' itself is urbanised and tamed. Wilbur does admit that 'I'm doing rather a lot with that toad' and adds, in the same interview, that this was 'the only instance in which I went straight from something that happened to me to writing a poem about it'.<sup>29</sup> Larkin, with his "Mower" [CP 214] had inadvertently meted out the same fate to a hedgehog, had 'mauled its unobtrusive world / Unmendably'. The hedgehog had been a familiar mammal and evoked anthropomorphic feelings of loss: 'The first day after a death, the new absence / Is always the same'. The cerebral, unemotional observer of Wilbur's "Toad" appears as one reflected in the glass of a natural history museum display-case, through which he can delve 'lost Amphibia's emperies'.

Still in the natural history museum, as it were, "Still, Citizen Sparrow" [NCP 318] honours by analogy with the North American vulture, the American politician, a creature who, of necessity, has also evolved a crooked beak:

The naked-headed one. Pardon him, you  
Who dart in the orchard isles, for it is he  
Devours death, mocks mutability,  
Has heart to make an end, keeps nature new.

The 'citizen' may live life in ordered, 'orchard isles' only if someone else engages with the distasteful expediencies of public life on his behalf. The correct sense of 'mock' here, Donald Hill takes to be 'mimic' or 'imitate'. The poem, Hill is satisfied, is "a plea for keeping the faults of great men in perspective" [Hill (1967) p.73]. The raw zoological reality of this third stanza is clear metaphor for the cut-and-thrust of political life. The Thanksgiving turkey is likewise saluted in "A Black November Turkey" [NCP 238-9]:

29. Wilbur, quoted in Hill (1967) p.79-80, also cited in Edgecombe (1997) p.57.

darkly auspicious as  
The ace of spades,  
  
Himself his own cortège  
And puffed with the pomp of death,

The frontier imperturbability of America's peoples is oddly conjured up by the figure of that lone and native lofty bird with its 'pale-blue bony head / Set on its shepherd's crook' and wearing a 'vague, superb / And timeless look. The dodo in "The Walgh-Vogel" [NCP 358] is invited to 'Sit vastly on the branches of our trees, / And chant us grandly all improbabilities'. Wilbur's birds are not invoked for their wings of fancy. In "All These Birds" [NCP 269] the hawk, lark and nightingale of Hopkins, Shelley and Keats respectively are dismissed with

Agreed that all these birds,  
/  
Perform upon the kitestrings of our sight  
In a false distance, that the day and night  
Are full of wingèd words  
gone rather stale,

—only to be readmitted, after weary acknowledgement of ornithology's findings, as symbols of the flight of the imagination. A plea for a second finding, after the findings of science. Birds, irrespective of species, serve as porters to allegory, as in "In a Bird Sanctuary" [NCP 354-5]. Here, in a witty conundrum, liberty as virtue and liberty as nuisance are opposed:

The liberty of any things becomes  
the liberty of all. ...  
/  
we must figure out  
what all's about.

Contemplation of the "all" is Wilbur's might be said to be Wilbur's recurring preoccupation—Kinzie says it is preoccupation with 'seeing' [op.cit.]—except that the poet himself disclaims preoccupations. It is for critics and scholars to divine such, and even where they do, these are no more than perceived thematic boulders in a widely-strewn terrain.

Birds caged impel Wilbur to a rare flash of anger in the discordant final stanza of "Marché aux Oiseaux" [NCP 296]. The 'termless hunt for love' and the 'tyranny of one outrageous need' are castigated as perversions of Burke's truth: 'We love the small'.

In these near-fables of frog and bird the subject is never belittled and remains foregrounded, while the *object*, in the background, is never lost sight of. The poet himself, rejecting Karl Shapiro's exclusion of the literary and historical past, may have summed up his own technique in saying: 'It takes a master to make references, or what Robert Frost called "displacements" without in any way falsifying the poem's voice, its way of talking' [*Responses*, p.31]. That that response was no lofty claim to laurelled privilege is evident from other remarks apropos the same issue:

the basic aesthetic mistake in *Finnegans Wake* is what one might call, in the language of the New Critics, "the fallacy of mere reference". . . .it should be the use of the reference, and not its inherent prestige, which demands response.<sup>30</sup>

#### *INTER PARES*

The patent sneer in Ian Hamilton's 1989 *TLS* article, "A Talent of the Shallows", is confidently disposed of by Michelson [op.cit., pp.154-7], who took the trouble to obtain first-hand information from Wilbur about "Cottage Street" and noted, too, Clive James' altered opinion of Wilbur's poetry. Hamilton's late repetition of Jarrell's criticisms failed to do either but, seeming to miss the point, spoke dismissively of 'weekending nature poems' in the *Walking to Sleep* collection, and concentrated on the first half only of "Icarium Mare", ignoring its blinding conclusion, to which the supposed 'accidental repetitions, ugly rhymes, hideous inversions, arch inversions' are a deliberate classical and scriptural foil. Michelson did find Hamilton's review 'provocative in a useful way' in its reading of "Cottage Street" as a confessional poem. The more general charge of shallowness provokes

an elenctic response. Is Wilbur's "Walking to Sleep" any less profound than W.C. Williams' similarly apostrophising "A Goodnight"?

Go to sleep—though of course you will not—  
/  
A black fungus springs out about lonely church doors—  
sleep, sleep. The Night, coming down upon  
the wet boulevard, would start you awake with his  
message, to have in at your window. Pay no  
heed to him. ...  
/  
... He would keep you from sleeping  
... he is  
a crackbrained messenger.  
He would have you sit under your desk lamp  
brooding, pondering; ...  
/

And the night passes—and never passes—

W.C.W., *Collected Poems* (Paladin), Vol I, pp.144-5.

30. Cummins, Paul F. (1971) *Richard Wilbur*, p.18.

Night, the writer's companion, with its sometimes unwanted companion, sleep, is the one addressed here. Sleep, in Wilbur's poem a 'kind assassin', first conducts the subject on a hallucinogenic journey, once he or she consents to 'Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind'. The night's work is never done for Williams. Each night yields new material to Wilbur.

Gjertrud Schnackenberg's "How did it seem to Sylvia" shares with Wilbur's "Leaving" the same note of self-observation:

Just like an hour with neighbours, I would think,  
Where one, invited by a pallid host,  
Disliked the guests and felt too sick to drink.  
Yet who, in obligation, mouthed a toast  
And took a sip, shook hands, ignored the wink  
Of bored and interested alike; at most  
The only one who understood the joke,  
Who slipped out well before the first glass broke.

[Dacey and Jauss: *Strong Measures*, 305]

Self-perception turns here on semi-colon in the seventh line of the ottava rima. Wilbur leaves his party at the point where he perceives the joke of social posturing to be on him too:

And there was wit's cocked head,  
And there the sleek  
And gaze-enameled look  
Of beauty's cheek.

/

We had not played so surely,  
Had we known.

[NCP 15-16]

Auden's "At the Party" is compassionate for the lonely crowd:

A howl for recognition, shrill with fear,  
Shakes the jam-packed apartment, but each ear  
Is listening to its hearing, so none hear.

[CP 738]

Larkin's "Vers de Société" pretends to be cuttingly the opposite:

Just think of all the spare time that has flown  
Straight into nothingness by being filled  
With forks and faces, rather than repaid  
Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,  
And looking out to see the moon thinned

To an air-sharpened blade.

[CP 181]

Wilbur's poem, though from his latest and most 'personal' collection, still observes the self with wry detachment, seeing in friends 'Half-lost in dignities /Till now unseen' how, with echoes of "Giacometti", he and his wife had been, like them, 'Filling ourselves as sculpture / Fills the stone'.

May Sarton chooses to challenge the implied docility and serenity of the woman sewing in the steady beam of sunlight in Pieter de Hooch's painting:

This is a room where I have lived as woman,  
Lived too what the Dutch painter does not tell—  
The wild skies overhead, dissolving, breaking,  
And how that broken light is never still  
Bent to her sewing, she looks drenched in calm  
Raw grief is disciplined to the fine thread.  
But in her heart this woman is the storm;  
Alive, deep in herself, holds wind and rain,  
Remaking chaos into an intimate order  
Where sometime light flows through a windowpane

*Dutch Interior* [Dacey and Jauss, 303]

It is Adrienne Rich, in an early poem, "Love in the Museum", who employs this reflective convention—speaking a love colloquy through it to make the point—to question Eliot's prescription for artistic detachment:

Or let me think I pause beside a door  
And see you in a bodice by Vermeer,  
Where light falls quartered on the polished floor  
And rims the line of water tilting clear  
Out of an earthen pitcher as you pour.

But art requires a distance:

*Collected Early Poems*, 113.

Wilbur, in "Objects", sees that it is a 'maculate, cracked, askew, / Gay-pocked and potsherd world' that he voyages, but nonetheless lauds, and calls on us to emulate de Hooch's ability to 'Guard and gild what's common', to 'have objects speak'. Howard Nemerov, essaying Vermeer, echoes Wilbur's call:

And the marvellous things that light is able to do,  
How beautiful! a modesty which is  
Seductive extremely, the care for daily things.

/

...a lady weighing gold

/

In the great reckoning of little rooms  
Where the weight of life is lifted and made light,

"Vermeer" [TC 12]

In closely parallel settings, the Williams, Schnackenberg, Sartre, and Larkin personae all personalize the poetic experience. Auden is at the party and would not be anywhere else. Wilbur, for once, is too, but maintains his wry detachment, as with Nemerov in the picture gallery. The reader is free to inhabit a Wilbur poem, as he is to look around at the garden party, while Wilbur himself steps back. Wilbur is a very reliable narrator, but is not himself the focalizer of his poems, or, where he is, is so only as a third-party character, so drawn by the poet himself.

### CHAPTER III

#### PHONAESTHEMICS, SYNAESTHETICS: THE SHAPE OF SOUND, THE LOOK OF SENSE

The poems of the first collection in *NCP*, the war poems included, are characterized by flutterings of light and shadow, white-outs, silver glintings, sudden saturations of colour (mostly blue), and by leaps of perception. It is as if the shutter of the mind's eye is flashing madly, strobing the lunges of thought and stringing them together in a narrative reel. Jarrell was right to say that those poems 'were all scenes' [*RWC*, 46] but there is more to them, as to the later poems, than colour-supplement journalism. That light and colour should find their way into the poems of an artist's son is not surprising. In the first collection they permeate three poems in succession: "Objects", "A Dutch Courtyard", and "My Father Paints the Summer" [*NCP* 360-3]. All three draw their conceits from painting: 'the trench of light on boards' and 'the sun submerged in beer' are the immediate "Objects" of Pieter de Hooch's 'devout intransitive eye'—devout: reverent, that is, toward true objects, and intransitive in that it does not stop at the object but, inverting perspective, projects back to the beholder a true picture of society, such as objects reveal. The poet's wry imagining of his own intransitive eye peering down from the face of a Lewis Carroll Cheshire cat is plain declaration of his calling to draw from objects, as de Hooch did. The same painting supplies the next conceit, in the same Dutch courtyard—that it is our thoughts, and place and moment which oxidize, save that we are rich enough, like Andrew Mellon, and can buy a moment, whole, entire and possess it forever:

...This courtyard may appear  
To be consumed with sun,  
Most mortally to burn,  
Yet it is quite beyond the reach of eyes  
Or thoughts, ...

[*NCP* 362]

In "My father Paints the Summer", the poet's artist father 'by artificial light... Tricks into sight... a summer never seen, / A granted green'. We do not *see* our summers, or any other time of life; that the artist and the poet do for us:

Caught Summer is always an imagined time.  
Time gave it, yes, but time out of any mind.  
There must be prime  
In the heart to beget that season, to reach past rain and find  
Riding past the palest days

Its perfect blaze.

[NCP 363]

The insertion of an indefinite article endows that commonplace expression: ‘time out of mind’ with compounded meaning, richly generous. It is extraordinary that this same poem should occasion such grudging detraction as this, from Breslin

The father possesses exactly that magical, visionary power which Wilbur indirectly discredits in his lifelong “public quarrel” with Poe. By this strategy the son avoids direct rivalry with the father and counters imaginative omnipotence with a skillful traditionalism [op.cit., p.43]

Mind, light, and colour are all directly addressed in the nonce sextets of “Two Songs in a Stanza of Beddoes” [NCP 366-7]. The ear might hear in this something of the ‘extravagant synesthesia and syntactic inversion’ that Edgecombe sees as amounting to preciousness in Song I<sup>31</sup>—if one didn’t notice that the poet is simulating the *mind’s* voice. This is another Wilbur voyage on the seas of fitful thought and, in Song I, in a land-yacht, as it were.

That lavished sunlight, where  
And lilac-mottled air,  
And where the fair-skinned winds  
That touched the plum  
To fall? All gone; my mind’s  
Lost all the summer, ...  
/

...Run,  
Mindseye, ...  
/  
...mind  
...be bleak  
And howling hollow  
Come tender winter, ...  
/  
Frost these forgetful eyes  
From day’s sheet-metal skies  
And viselike night.

[NCP 366]

Early and late, the mind and its eye are ever this poet’s subject. The poem appears immediately after “Sun and Air”, another evocation of atmospheric, though that poem is impersonal and in the tighter, curial sonnet form. The wild updraughts and downdraughts of Shelley’s ‘West Wind’ are perhaps consciously echoed, but out of them a bird of thought flies, that is, one might say, given the poet’s concern with Poe, almost raven-like in portent:

A bird made dark, unclear,  
To sea-deep flies,

[NCP 367]

The compression of ‘sheet-metal skies and viselike night’, make for a darkly shadowed poem, though one dappled with light-effects: ‘fair-skinned winds’ that caress the plum in stanza I are troubling gusts by stanza III, stretching the blue-green, needle-leaved tamarack and threatening to extinguish the ‘guttering’ grasses. But, though diving to ‘sea-deep’, the bird has plummeted from the ‘day’s blue brink’. That latter hue seems to thread its way through the earlier poetry. The slightest shade of Charlotte Wilbur ‘valleys’ the poet’s mind into ‘fabulous blue Lucernes’ in “The Beautiful Changes” [NCP 392]. Foreshadowing later poems on states of waking and sleeping, and playing on ‘eyes embarked for sleep’, “For Ellen” [NCP 388] suggests that his young daughter’s mind, charged by dreams, forges all afresh, in a blue fire: ‘utter blueness... bestowing blue... Blue heal-all breaks the pavingstone... That casual fire [of a sunny blue sky] will blister blue’. The ‘blue-eyed attention’ of the dying Aunt Virginia in “Lightness” [NCP 386] is the colour of lucidity. In an address to the sea, in “Conjuration” [NCP 282], ‘receding fingers’ point to the ‘slow paludal games’ played out in the undertow. These are not Whitman’s tellurian ‘crooked inviting fingers’, nor even the [later] chelate clutchings of Hughes’ “Relic” (‘Time in the sea eats its tail’); rather, enfolding a characteristic Wilbur word-play on a commonplace, ‘true blue’, are a typical reflection on thought itself, of which blue is the colour:

...and twin  
 My double deep; O Tides,  
 Return a truer blue, make one  
 The sky’s blue speech, and what the sea confides.  
 [NCP 282]

The photosensitive chromatics of “October Maples, Portland” [NCP 198] culminate in a laundered Marian blue, a drench of colour having washed ‘eye and brain’. This, together with the Marian litany in the last line of “Apology” [NCP 261] and the covert mariology of “On Freedom’s Ground” [NCP 44-8] makes for a curiosity, not mentioned by Wilbur, and one that does not appear to be a theme in Wilbur criticism. The airy context of all three Marian references suggests a poetic conceit pointed on the ethereal blueness that can go with unshakeable, instinctive belief, as in mariolatry. Without pressing the point, **one can find more than twenty separate usages of the word ‘blue’ or ‘azure’ (just four of the latter) in the NCP collections**, occurring with greatest frequency in *The Beautiful Changes* and *The Things of this World*.

Native American wit and weather, too, give Wilbur further scope for word-play. Paying tribute to the aubergine in “The Melongène” [NCP 359], he uses the neo-classical tradition of such address and manages to tilt at America’s would-be aristocracy:

Our uncrowned kings have no such regal rind  
As this; their purple stain  
Is in the mind.

This ‘wronged kingly fruit’, sporting ‘a crown that’s green’, reproves pretension.

Unoriginal (American) Adam christened it *The Egg-plant*. “Sun and Air” [NCP 365] describes a New England thunderstorm. In having a six-line “octave” it is a curial sonnet, in terza rima. A prayer in celebration of Sun and Air, ‘those two goods’, it concludes with a joyous declaration of the powers of both at their height:

Trample with light or blow all heaven blind with chaff

The latter phrase might have come straight from Wilbur’s own Episcopalian saint, Herbert. While the air ‘staggers’ and, again, ‘All stir sickens... Waiting the sun’s siege out’, the weather begins to break, as might be expected, at the seventh line. The wind that ‘barely climbs into to the hills; / Saws thin and splinters among the roots of grasses’ is unmistakably North American. The “Storm in April” [NCP 52], forty years later, proceeds through quatrains rhyming *abcb*, *bded*, etc. Again, there is celebration, and thanks; this time for the light-lying beauty of Spring snow. The blows that life deals us are also lightly alluded to, by the older poet, with the fitting grace of a classical reference in the first stanza, and then dismissed:

Some winters, taking leave,  
Deal us a last, hard blow,  
Salting the ground like Carthage  
Before they will go.

But the bright, milling snow  
Which throngs the air today—

The surface matter is handled, as ever, with such technical application as to foreground it, veiling deeper allusions. There is something sinister in the hovering milkweed of the last line, and the dilation of time in the concluding stanza seems too pointedly figurative:

This storm, if I am right,  
Will not be wholly over  
Till green fields, here and there,  
Turn white with clover,

And through chill air the puffs of milkweed hover.

Wilbur is ‘ear-sighted’, and may have acquired this trait through the influence of Hopkins, as Babette Deutsch has suggested [cf. *RWC*, 19, 23]. Robert Graves, in his 1926 essay, “The Future of Poetry”, had this to say on the subject of the eye and the ear in poetry:

Unless some new mechanical contrivance enables us to listen to recorded poems as quickly

and casually as we turn the pages of a book of verse—but neither the gramophone nor the radio can yet do that for us—poetry will be written more and more for the eye and the inner

ear, rather than for the ear and the inner eye. [O'Prey, p.25]

Wilbur, in his poetry, has nonetheless resolutely stuck with the latter combination (his near-contemporary and fellow Fifties Formalist, John Hollander, is noted for his eye-appealing 'shape' poems; one of which, at least, "Swan and Shadow," must be adjudged a flawless success, surpassing even Herbert's "Easter Wings" in its parallel perfections). The delight in Wilbur's poetry, rather, is his deftly surprising choices of the right, felicitous word in the right place, and the appropriate diction for every occasion, word and diction chosen with the same unobtrusive touch. Where Hollander uses 'sleight of word' to match shape with meaning, Wilbur uses 'sleight of ear' to slip tiered puns past our notice. The triple pun on the word 'shade' in the fifth line of "The Beautiful Changes" is more pleasing, when discovered, than the conundrum of the three main stresses in the poem's title. And the earthy Frost would not have dared the profane pun in the 'frigging wind' of "Superiorities" [NCP 370]. If that poem is, as F.C. Golfing has remarked, 'an attempt at a genres outside his range', it is no less satisfying for that.<sup>32</sup> Only on this very New England sailing trip would someone heave an empty *quart* into the stomach of the wave. And whatever one might encounter below decks in the Solent, it would not be *buddies*. The middle stanza of the poem contains Wilbur's salute (characteristically) to self-control:

Phipps at the bucking rail was still  
And keenly modest as a star,  
Attentive to each blast and surge,  
And so becalmed the storm in him.

Disclaiming the degree of synaesthetic invention attributed to "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" by May Swenson—who enumerated Sound, Relative Tension, Shape, Colour, Motion and Relative Weight in the mechanics of that poem—Wilbur would say only that he was sure that: 'one's feeling [*sic*] of "rightness" in a developing poem most often depend on the half-conscious achievement of appropriate vowel and consonant colour'<sup>33</sup> What the first six drafts of the opening lines of that poem reveal is, as the poet says of them, 'a gradual moving away from too much objective detail, and a liberation of the rhythm toward the abruptness of speech' [Ostroff, *ibid.*, p.20]. The felicitous changes rung with the suspensions and leavings of soul and disembodied laundry seem, in their final form, quite unerringly correct. None of the earlier drafts could possibly have done.

What appears then as an inability in certain ‘bell’ poems to refrain from aural puns seems might, had we like access to preliminary drafts, look less less like bell-push jingles and have instead that same inevitability of composition about them. A predilection for sound-play

32. Golfing. “A Remarkable New Talent”. Salinger, p32.

33. Ostroff, A. (1964) *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic*, pp.13,17.

cannot be denied, as is evident in, say, “Folk Tune”[NCP 364]. John Bunyan’s axe causes the forests to strum ‘as one loud lute’. The poem is a variation on the theme of dream-and-waking, but also a celebration of sound-significance generally:

Now when the darkness in my street  
Nibbles the last and crusty crumbs  
Of sound, and all the city numbs  
And goes to sleep upon its feet,  
  
I listen hard to hear its dreams:

As well, John Henry’s hammer ‘ringing out our wrong’ hints at a fascination with the poetic possibilities of echoing, metallic sound. “A Dubious Night” [NCP 372] opens with a bell

‘diphthonging’ in the air. The ‘mauled kyries’ and ‘queer elisions’ add a characteristically multiple pun, particularly the irreverent and at the same time campanologically accurate ‘mauled’(which occurs again in the penultimate stanza of “In a Churchyard” NCP 128). In “Clearness” [NCP 313], the ring of a hammer is heard again, in the second line, but this time the keen ear of the poet suspects that tone can be lost in tintinabulation, as something is carried away in strained and rarefied vision, just as the subtle word-play on ‘exacted vision’ is almost unheard amid the cascading tinkle of the simile that follows:

This was the town of my mind’s exacted vision  
Where truths fell from the bells like a jackpot of dimes

Listening to Beethoven’s ‘thunderous affirmations at breakfast’ so F. McConnell thinks, claims ‘too much, too early’, for the regenerative powers of art.<sup>34</sup> Bruce Michelson rather puzzlingly describes “C Minor” [NCP 74-5] as ‘another of Wilbur’s vexing Dutch-dooryard poems’ [op.cit., p.147] and says this poem is about ‘the pace, the place, the human

metabolics of art’. Surely, it is about sound and inescapable signification of sound, as in “Bell Speech” [NCP 380]: *toothless voice... stricken speech... clear dumb sound*. The critic Calvin Bedient once described Richard Wilbur as ‘clapper happy’. He is that in this poem,

to resounding effect. In yet another poem, Wilbur's own elegy, "In a Churchyard" [NCP 127-8], *scuffed voices in the drive* are harbingers too, as when, in "C Minor", through the letter box comes:

Something that makes you pause and with fixed shadow  
Stand on the driveway gravel, your bent head  
Scanning the snatched pages until the sad  
Or fortunate news is read

[NCP 74]

In both, sound is held in abeyance: *the balked imminence of uncommitted sound* in the churchyard, for what it might portend, the portentous Beethoven in the domestic "C Minor"

34. McConnell, F. "Reconsideration: The Poetry of Richard Wilbur", *New Republic*, Jul29 1978. lest it be previous to the day's outcome. The *the buzz of prayer said* in "Churchyard" and a *new thing understood* in "C Minor" are sussurations from Dickinson and Herbert. In both poems something is worrying the subconscious, a nagging sound, or absence of it: *balked and dissatisfied* in "C Minor", a *pulseless clangor* in "In a Churchyard" that *shadows all our thought*. The ultrasound of intimation is wittily plumbed in word-play:

And who but those unfathomably deaf  
Who quiet all this ground  
Could catch, within the ear's diminished clef,  
A music innocent of time and sound?

[NCP 127]

There is too, as Edgecombe has pointed out [op.cit., 111], a Berkeleian quality to this poem's demonstration that the aural imagination, like the visual, can function in a void of sense experience. What is inaudible to the mortal ear is heard in the the mind's ear—to which the 'Mind Reader' himself is self-reproachfully attentive (NCP 109)—abated significance compelling its own anticipation:

What do the living hear, then, when the bell  
Hangs plumb within the tower  
Of the still church, and still their thoughts compel  
Pure tollings that intend no mortal hour?

As when a ferry for the shore of death  
Glides looming toward the dock,  
Her engines cut, her spirits bating breath  
As the ranked pilings narrow toward the shock.

[NCP 127]

Wilbur has devoted a full essay: "Round about a poem of Housman's" [*Responses*] to defending, against Karl Shapiro's objections, the place in poetry of the literary, historical and mythological allusion. The awaited shudder of that ferry meeting the dock is eloquent argument of his case.

Bell-metal sound and stilled sensibilities are, in fact, a recurring combination. There are on a casual count twenty-five separate usages of the words ‘bell/s’, ‘chimes’, or ‘sound’ in the *NCP* collections; sixteen such usages in the collection *Ceremony* alone. In “A Simile for Her Smile” [*NCP* 333] passage of a packet, or ferry, ‘balks’ the traffic on a highway—that word ‘balk’ again—it occurs in four poems (*NCP* 74,128,142,333)—and ‘clear bells’ herald her passage through the drawbridge. In “Wellfleet: The House” [*NCP* 319] a stricken clock gives out a ‘buoy sound’ amid sea-reflected light’. Bells at their most ethereal are invoked by the moonlit waves of “Five Women Bathing by Moonlight” [*NCP* 308] which yield to the poet a semblance of ‘land / Leasing each wave the palest peals / Of bright apparent notes of sand’. A fondness for bells? Michelson [op.cit., p.216] comments on the ‘haiku-like compression’ of “Wyeth’s Milk Cans” [*NCP* 25] in which Wilbur makes the dairy drums into sound-caissons containing all the brittle, pent-up stillness of frost-hardened farmland. The untolled stillness there is eloquently suspenseful, as in its Japanese parallel:

On the one-ton temple bell  
a moonmoth, folded in sleep,  
sits still.

—Taniguchi Buson [Kennedy, X.J., 1991, p.577]

Wilbur has said that imagery is not enough, that *there must be areas of statement* (in the “Genie in the Bottle” essay; cf. Hill, p.89-90). In Western poetry, in English language poetry above all, language is inescapably metaphorical. By expressly expressing the metaphor, ‘What if these two bells tolled?’, Wilbur strips it away at the same time, to a Japanese objectivity. Sound, most often in its breathless absence, as here, is used to summon thought.

Robert Greer Cohn, by extension from Mallarmé’s *Les Mots Anglais*, has demonstrated that “every effect distinguished in Wilbur is close to the equivalent effect in Mallarmé”.<sup>35</sup> From the letter *a*, “ideal for expressing flatness, matness, calm, vapidty...”, through to *z*—useful when conveying feelings of puzzlement and dazzlement, Cohn’s paper retrieves convincing examples at will from Wilbur poems. Cohn cites Wilbur as an exemplar of “letter-symbolism”. The symbolism, in Wilbur’s case contrives to look like no more than the known coincidence of sound-association with meaning, commonly found in English. What does become apparent from Cohn’s quick twenty-six letter survey of Wilbur, is how easy it is to mistake for mere alliteration the carefully chosen sound-sense of a master poet.

Wilbur himself, indulging his passion for riddles the while, contributes two poems on the very subject of letters and their associations, “&” and “O” [NCP 376,377]:

A slopeshouldered shape from scurrying burdens  
Backward and forth...

Here, Wilbur wittily manages to suggest how letters might have got their shape and associations in the first place. In the last line of the two quatrains, he then employs the letter

*p* to test the theory:

Poor, porter *p*ander ampersand

“O” is more ambitious:

The idle dayseye,...  
... the pointblank matin sun  
Sanctified the first circle; thence for fun  
Doctors deduced a shape, which some called real  
..., a shape of spare appeal

35. Greer Cohn, “The ABCs of Richard Wilbur”, *Literature-Interpretation-Theory (LIT)*,  
New York: 1990 Nov., 2:2, p.119.

This accords perfectly with the psychology of perception expounded throughout Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*: on coming first to sight, we have to be *told* that a circle is a circle. Gombrich by exhaustive example shows that there is no such thing as the ‘innocent eye’ which Ruskin sought to recover for art, and endorses the view of Heinrich Wölfflin that all paintings owe more to other paintings than they owe to direct perception. Citing William James, Gombrich notes furthermore that preconception is an inescapable part of human communication, since so much of what we comprehend from speech and print is supplied from auditory and visual hints, as we realise to our dismay when we fail to keep up with a foreign language dialogue.<sup>36</sup> Wilbur starts the argument of his essay “Poetry’s Debt to Poetry” with the remark that ‘The fact that art is provoked by art should not surprise us’

[*Responses*, 161,183]. He concludes confessing to have ‘scarcely begun to count the ways in which poetry may be indebted or reactive to other poetry’. Allusion to Platonic form-and-ideal is implicit, while the purported impulse for the poem is scrupulously addressed:

Now I go backward, filling by one and one  
Circles with hickory spokes and rich soft shields  
Of petalled dayseyes,

The limp disks tossed by the craftsman’s hawk and the true lines of hickory-grain combine the tactile and the geometric in the last line:

No hawk or hickory to true my run.

Word-play in a Wilbur ending, as here, calls some attention to itself and attention is thereby

spun back again upon the theme. The double play on the OE *dægeseýe* is hub of this sonnet and homage to his beloved Anglo-Saxon and its kennings. The dedication of two poems like “&” and “O”, each whimsically dressed up as mere riddles for the eye, to language and its workings and to perception and its workings, bespeaks the poet’s own dedication to timeless poetry, beyond mere events. The concern for the work that a word does extends from the pictographic shape and sound-associations of individual letters in words, to the selection and strategic placement of words at turning-points. Noting that ‘pivotal and energetic verbs so often are placed in a rhyming position’, Anthony Hecht sees Wilbur’s interest in motion: ‘This delight in nimbleness’ as leading to his poetry exhibiting ‘the most important and best aspects of cinematic film’, but prefers to see in some lines of Tennyson ‘a far more likely source for some of Wilbur’s techniques than Hollywood could come up with’.<sup>37</sup> Wilbur himself had made some comments in 1967 about poetry and film, and had disclaimed conscious influence from film technique: ‘watching film is (for me, for most) so much less judicial and analytic than other art experience’ [*Catbird’s Song*, 153-4]

36. Gombrich, E. *Art and Illusion*. London: Phaidon, 1993, pp.170 & 268.

37. Hecht: “The Motions of the Mind”, in Salinger: *Richard Wilbur’s Creation*, p.126.

Wilbur anticipates Hecht’s conclusion when he says, in the same article:

I venture with diffidence the opinion that certain pre-Edison poetry was genuinely cinematic.

Pointing out that we may, without necessarily misleading ourselves, see cinematic parallels in the tumbling tableaux of *Paradise Lost*—Milton being, more likely, influenced by the ‘spatial surprises of Baroque architecture’—Wilbur does think that “Marginalia” [*NCP* 266] may owe something to the camera in its ‘close and rapid scanning of details, an insubordination of authenticating particulars, abrupt shifting’ (ibid.), and that the first line of “In The Elegy Season” [*NCP* 295] may be ‘an effort at the instant scenic fullness of an opening shot’ (ibid.). He adds that, also, that the first four lines of “An Event” [*NCP* 274] may be indebted to trick photography. Disappointingly, for those who would pursue the theory, he concludes that ‘all of the above are doubtful’, and that only in “Beasts” [*NCP* 196] and “The Undead” [*NCP* 263] is the cinematic—to horror films—beyond doubt. Henry Taylor’s 1974 paper on cinematic devices in Wilbur’s poetry concedes that:

cinematic devices are not abundant in Wilbur’s poetry. They do not operate in the poems which allude to specific films, nor are they often at work in the larger group of poems whose emphasis on movement and visual imagery suggests that they might be filmed<sup>38</sup>

The *National Geographic*-type film-shot used by Wilbur in the opening stanza of “Castles and Distances” [NCP 289] is an effective lead-in to a poem of deep-inlaid meanings. The device is declared as such by the references in the second stanza to camera lens and film palaces. The cinematic function of the device is not thereafter needed in the succeeding twelve stanzas. In “Walking to Sleep” [NCP 158-161] Wilbur’s cinematic reference to purely figurative Potemkin Barns, and to hypnagogic thought skipping over logical connectedness, are offered as overt similes, viewfinders to the main imagery of the poem. What Taylor describes as montage: the dream-tunnel from cellar, to crypt, to mineshaft to Pharaonic tomb, is actually a linear sequence.

End-words, given his pervasive use of enjambment, are the very joints of Wilbur’s poetry. The fascination of his poetry for philologists—the Arkansas Philological Association, in particular, has shown much interest in him—comes as no surprise. David W. Taylor’s 1978 paper on end-words in Wilbur’s poetry illustrates that Wilbur end-words, when read in isolation, can be seen to encode additional information, sometimes in a different tone, to what is in the main poem, can provide a concise summary of a stanza, and

38. Taylor, H., “Cinematic Devices in Richard Wilbur’s Poetry”, *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 1974, 28, 41-48.

provide miniature portraits of characters (as in “Two Voices in a Meadow”, NCP 181).

Taylor notes that Wilbur’s habit of placing a line’s key word at the end gives a natural summary element to the end-words and that this technique seems to work best in poems with shorter lines, where there are fewer intervening elements. Taylor ventures to suggest that, in unrhymed poems, Wilbur has found in this technique an alternative to rhyme.<sup>39</sup>

Prompted by Taylor’s study, one can read in “Fall in Corrales” [NCP 222] not alone a concise summary of each stanza in the end-words, but a virtual acrostic of the whole poem. The typically happy-eyed Wilbur impressions, such as the ‘perfect rumples’ of the empty river-bed, are then seen to serve as sinuously beguiling images that lead us to the stone marker at the end of each line. The dazzling play of seemingly ephemeral imagery mentioned at the outset of this chapter conceals a subtly concrete poetry.

39. Taylor, D.W., "End-Words in Richard Wilbur's Poems". *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association*, State University, AK 1978, 4:3, p.27.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### PRIVATE EYE, PUBLIC VOICE

As with the the declared sense of distance from his material generally, the personal occurs in Wilbur's poetry in quirky outcrops which are yet examined with the same unblinking fish-eye gaze reserved for his poetry of things and their imaginary conjugations. Public comment is likewise made in in constructions that are ever in the service of poetry first. It is a *Miltonic* sonnet which is addressed to Mr Johnson. The Vietnam war is conjoined with WWII genocide, but only in Dali-like fleshly shapes in magma. Present outrage, 'time's fright' encountered on the Marginal Way, is recast in cosmic time and lent a lithic record for some future setting to rights in a resolution of all ordered things. The occasions for private musings or public comment are occasions only if they occasion the making of poetry:

The carpenter's made a hole  
In the parlor floor, and I'm standing  
Staring down into it now  
At four o'clock in the evening,  
As Schliemann stood when his shovel  
Knocked on the crowns of Troy.

*A Hole in the Floor* [NCP 189]

Kneeling and peering through it, the Wilbur asks:

... what am I after?

/

... that untrodden place,  
The house's very soul,  
Where time has stored our footbeats  
And the long skein of our voices?

*Footbeats*, not heartbeats; the long *skein* of our voices. Adrienne Rich uses that word to haunting effect in “Mathilde in Normandy”. No, Wilbur is after something else:

Not these, but the buried strangeness  
Which nourishes the known:

Always, things of the *mind*. Outwith which there are no things, since, as Berkeley has demonstrated, coherent perception of anything is impossible unless it first exist as a concept within the mind [cf. Berman, *op.cit.*, 22-3].

That spring from which the floor-lamp  
Drinks now a wilder bloom,  
Inflaming the damask love-seat  
And the whole dangerous room.

[NCP 190]

Now, says A.K. Weatherhead, we may say ‘so much depends upon a hole in the floor, cut by the carpenter, beside the gold shavings!’.<sup>40</sup> Weatherhead defines Wilbur’s technique here as imagery impregnated with the slow-release of meaning. This is not to denigrate the famous original of the parody, which Dana Gioia, while castigating sloppiness in the New Formalism, shows did the same thing but by very different means—by stopping language in its tracks.<sup>41</sup> In the necessarily simple and direct sentiments of “A Wedding Toast”, on the occasion of the marriage of his son, there are two lines which might sum up the Wilbur quest (besides a couple which, with deliciously understated wit, manage to hint at possibility of insobriety in a saint):

Which is to say that what love sees is true;  
That the world’s fullness is not made but found.

[NCP 61]

That is to affirm again, with Berkeley, that seeing, in the full sense of all the perceptive faculties, is what creates our world as we experience it. The deftly interpolated commonplace expression ‘it made no earthly sense’ hits home with effect on the double-take. *Earthly* sense is an oxymoron. In the poem addressed to his writer daughter that conviction is expressed in the strongest terms:

It is always a matter, my darling,  
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. ...

[NCP 54]

The putative self-reproach in the lattermost clause is harshly interpreted by Ian Hamilton [TLS, Sep.15-21, 1989]. Seen properly in its deeper context, it surely expresses the writer’s duty to *seeing*. The admiration for like perception of time and place evidenced in a dead

friend, is occasion for a Berkeleian musing in “The Mill” [NCP 276], on ‘Time all alone and talking to himself / In his eternal rattle’. The millwheel turns still, unheard, except in the poet’s mind. The elegy for the friend is etched with regret at the failed life that produced that one ‘sound and sovereign anecdote’. The first line:

The spoiling daylight inched along the bar-top,  
has an uncanny echo of Anthony Hecht’s *Third Avenue in Sunlight*, which also has as its overt subject a ‘failed’ friend and is spoken, too, from a barroom perspective:

Third Avenue in sunlight. Nature’s error.  
/  
Daily the prowling sunlight whets its knife  
Along the sidewalk

Is “The Mill” a censure of despair? There is a clear note of reproof:

40. Weatherhead, A.K., “Richard Wilbur: Poetry of Things”. *ELH*, 1968, 35, p.616.

41. Gioia, D. *Can Poetry Matter?* Saint .Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992, pp. 33-4.

The round sums all bestowed, and now you spent  
Your pocket change, so as to be rid of it.

The proper attitude is contrasted in “Icarium Mare”:

Aspiring, with this lesser globe of sight,  
To gather tokens of the light  
Not in the bullion, but in the loose change  
[NCP 21]

A Kansas sexual encounter in youth is told in a tense monologue that out-kerouacs

Kerouac:

He is no one I really know,  
The sun-charred, gaunt young man  
/  
... liquor went  
Like an ice-pick into my mind.

Beneath her skirt I spied  
Two sea-cows on a floe.  
/  
I felt both drowned and parched.  
Desire leapt up like a trout.

“Hello,” she said, and her gum  
Gave a calculating crack.

*Piccola Commedia* [NCP 59-60]

This is confessional poetry, but carved with an ice-pick. *Vide* the last stanza:

This is something I’ve never told,  
And some of it I forget.  
But the heat! I can feel it yet,  
And that conniving cold.

The incident with which which the speaker in “A Finished Man” is acquainted with is told

with anecdotal intimacy, but the the dramatic monologue is spoken in the third person, distancing the speaker from the subject:

That woman, stunned by his appalling gaffe,  
Who with a napkin half-suppressed her laugh  
[NCP 40]

The dark consolation: ‘All witness darkens, eye by dimming eye’ shadows the hoped-for stone memorial that the sun ‘sculpts’. A dark poem, and one late in the last collection, it has, like others in the collection, a more personal, retrospective look. A snatch of personal history also occupies the first stanza of “For W.H. Auden” [NCP 26]

Now I am surer where they were going,  
The brakie loping the tops of the moving freight,  
The beautiful girls in their outboard, waving to someone  
As the stern dug in and the wake pleated the water,

Wilbur’s youthful sojourn as a railcar hobo, yes; girls in forties-style box-pleated skirts, yes; and, surely, some eroticism in that last line? The question applied to those random travellers, the freight-car brakeman and the pleasure-boating girls is applied also to others, summoned back from brief encounters in Wilbur’s past:

The uniformed children led by a nun  
Through the terminal’s uproar, the clew-drawn scholar descending  
The cast-iron stair of the stacks, shuffling his papers,  
The Indians, two to a blanket, passing in darkness,

The terminal is perhaps the ‘New Railway Station in Rome’ that so impressed Wilbur. And Auden did write:

But give me still, to stir imagination  
The chiaroscuro of the railway station  
*Letter to Lord Byron* [CP 89]

The uniform etymology of clue and *clew* provided an irresistible opportunity for a pun. The Indians? Inscrutable freightcar companions, perhaps. And, farther back,

Also the German prisoner switching  
His dusty neck as the truck backfired and started—  
Of all these noted in stride and detained in memory  
I now know better that they were going to die,

(one can’t help noticing in passing the trademark wordplay in *detained*).

All these, in apposition to one fact:

Since you, who sustained the civil tongue  
In a scattering time, and were poet of all our cities,  
Have for all your clever difference quietly left us,  
As we might have known that you would, by that common door.

Echoes of Geurnica and the Spanish Civil War, and of Auden’s own elegy for Yeats (‘Now he is scattered among a hundred cities’); the tribute to the modesty of an engaged life spent in the service of poetry in English on two continents setting up the awed half-disbelief; the

light disguise of the colonial's gentle reproach at desertion: these four lines speak a eulogy in wit and understatement of which the recipient would have approved. The painting of a public tribute in the *memento mori* genre, with unrelated figures of private mortality for background, is experimentally effective. Those figures touched only tangentially in the slightest, casual, way the life of the writer. Their unaccountable persistence in the poet's memory validates the preoccupation of poets: how to make human sense of sense impressions; how to make impressions of human sensibility. This poet is never sombre for long. His sprightly eye catches in "Transit" a voyeur's glimpse of forbidden beauty. It is rendered with the usual Wilbur flourish of the imagination. It is, too, one poem that needs to be quoted in its entirety. What if it signifies nothing? It would seem to say, 'since when does poetry, pure, need justification?'

A woman I have never seen before  
 Steps from the darkness of her town-house door  
 At just that crux of time when she is made  
 So beautiful that she or time must fade.

What use to claim that as she tugs her gloves  
 A phantom heraldry of all the loves  
 Blares from the lintel? That the staggered sun  
 Forgets, in his confusion, how to run?

Still, nothing changes as her perfect feet  
 Click down the walk that issues in the street,  
 Leaving the stations of her body there  
 As a whip maps the countries of the air.

[NCP 34]

'Let no word or thing be blackballed by sensibility' Wilbur has written in, appropriately, "Poetry and Happiness" [*Responses*, p.98]. Certainly not. *Crux* and *stations* may be a nod in the direction of *religio amoris*—cf. Edgecombe, p.150, but a familiar Wilbur fascination with temporal reality and unreality is, surely, the point: 'At just that crux of time when... she

or time must fade'. No mortal man, seeing such a vision, will ever let go of it. It becomes one more Poundian slide, adding to the 'stock of available reality', that R.P.Blackmur phrase of which John Berryman wrote, in "Olympus", "I was never altogether the same man after *that*" [Berryman, *CP*, 179].

The amount of night-time in Wilbur's poetry may be a trope for the darkness of the self

"In Limbo" [NCP 63-4] is a dark enough place to begin an examination of darkness in Wilbur. Typically, the beginning is rooted in the tangible present:

What rattles in the dark? The blinds at Brewster?  
 A sleepless academic resigns himself to the insistent ramblings of the mind at such times:

Through the shocked night of France, I surely hear  
A convoy moving up, whose treads and wheels  
Trouble the planking of a wooden bridge.

This is the war poetry that Wilbur denied himself, and us. ‘Treads’, appropriately, carries the double load of a pun. It supplies the tramping footsoldiers to animate the scene. The scene ‘flares and sinks’ appropriately, and is recalled years later when a late car ‘guns’ past in the Jersey night. Two eleven-line stanzas, thus far, a ‘clearing of the wits’ for the self-examination that is to come:

Now could I dream that all my selves and ages,  
Pretenders to the shadowed face I wear,

Then, the succession of wild imaginings and doubts, self-criticism—a virtual ‘out of body’ experience, is conventional enough except, as might be expected, for a focus on language:

Oh, all my broken dialects together;  
And that slow tongue which mumbles to invent

Forty four lines on, the sleeper reaches for the lamp-chain and ‘reality’ leaps back:

A room condenses and at once is true—  
Curtains, clock, a mirror which will frame  
This blinking mask light has clapped upon me. [NCP 64]

The moment, so brilliantly depicted and so masterfully set up, justifies the metaphysical speculation that follows:

I am a truant portion of the all  
Misshaped by time...

/

...homelessly at home.

Adrienne Rich has written a much more corporeal poem on the theme of *homelessly at home*:

Absence is homesick. Absence wants a home.

There follows much play on a thing’s construction by its absence. By the end, Absence has by long habituation established rights of domicile and will not go away

...But absence  
Always knew when to call.

What if Absence calls  
and a voice answers  
in the accent of home?

“A Story” [Time’s Power]

The emotional self is not in crisis in Wilbur’s poem; it is the speaker’s own contending selves that have to ‘parley and atone’ for what they have done to each other and, presumably, to others. The eye is, as ever, ‘fixed intently upon something else’.<sup>42</sup> The mind, which creates the self, is itself the more interesting of the two. Further speculations upon allusions and convergences of meaning in this poem are studiously made in Michelson (1991). The scope in a Wilbur poem for such speculations makes any ventured

synopsis open to question. Richness of meaning has been construed by some, in Wilbur's case, as intellectual self-indulgence, and critical elaborations of that richness can serve to confute rather than refute the charge.

There is more public poetry in Wilbur's oeuvre than first appears. In his own words: 'any full poetry is bound to have an implicit political dimension' [Butts, 43]. As discussed in Chapter II, one of his war poems, at least, "Mined Country", can be read as explicitly political. The rare indignation of the apostrophic "Miltonic Sonnet to Mr Johnson" [NCP 144] is deliciously eighteenth-century in its diction, and appropriately so. Mr Johnson, like any sitter, had sensitivities, and was at the mercy of the artist. His mistake was in thinking that he alone was the subject, when inevitably, mightier shades, of the company of Jefferson, still hovered in the background. His lack of humility could not go unpunished; his punishment: to be the object of Wilbur's wit.

Other than the cantata "On Freedom's Ground" [NCP 44-8], one other poem only, "For the Student Strikers" [NCP 73] appears to have been written to order: for the Wesleyan

42. Michelson, B., (1991) *Wilbur's Poetry*, p.14.

*Strike News* in the Spring of 1970, after the Kent State killings. The fact that colleges in the United States opened for business as usual again that fall need not be cited in justification of Wilbur's 'establishment' sympathies. To urge talk and discourse over 'blunt slogan' was morally courageous on the occasion. Wilbur's reticence to engage issues of his day with direct polemic is well expressed in "Another Voice" [NCP 218]:

The sword bites for peace,  
/  
Yet in those I love the most  
Some anger, love, or tact  
Hushes the giddy ghost  
Before atrocious fact.

Forgive me, patient voice  
Whose word I little doubt,  
/  
If I equivocate,

On that word: tact, Wilbur has more to say in the essay "Round About a Poem of Housman's". It is apprehension of what is meant in what is said—a skill reliant on knowledge of literary allusions and of literary convention, defended as a 'hard working' servant of poetry in the essay—but here signifying justifiable reticence, in the knowledge that what is meant may also be misread in what is said. His social comment is no less compassionate and accurate than Arthur Miller's. "In the Smoking Car", here [NCP 210], and "The Eye" contain a "Death of a Salesman" poignancy:

The grizzled, crew-cut head drops to his chest.

/

... in quiet pomp his litter goes,  
Carried by native girls with naked feet.

/

... righteous mutiny or sudden gale  
... beached him here;

/

Failure, the longed-for valley, takes him in.

The sudden gale or righteous mutiny are the ‘salesman’s’ own. He appears again in “The Eye”:

If the salesman’s head  
Rolls on the seat-back of the ’bus  
In ugly sleep, his open mouth  
Banjo-strung with spittle,

/

Remind me that I am here in body,  
A passenger, and rumpled.

/

That this eye not be folly’s loophole  
But giver of due regard.

[NCP 57]

There is not in Frost anything so nearly overtly wicked as Wilbur’s “To an American Poet Just Dead” [NCP 329]—Phelps Putnam, James Longenbach tells us [op.cit., p.75].

American suburbia is lacerated:

...gone from this rotten  
Taxable world to a higher standard of living.

The late Putnam, Wilbur notes, was one who:

...used to sing  
The praises of imaginary wines,  
And died, or so I’m told, of the real thing.

In this world ‘Of Sunday fathers loitering late in bed’ the ‘ssshh of sprays on little lawns’ is a godless echo of whispered chaplet prayers. Wilbur himself has enjoyed the life of rural outer suburbia, and acknowledges as much: ‘It is out in the comfy suburbs I read you are dead’. This uncharacteristically cutting poem is directed at *mindless* consumption. Even more savage is “Matthew VIII, 28ff.” [NCP 154]; its very title reads like a moral judgement:

We have deep faith in prosperity.  
/  
It is true that we go insane;  
/  
We shall not, however, resign  
Our trust in the high-heaped table and the full trough.

That which is objected to has displaced the ‘lightshifting corn ballets’ of Iowa afternoons in

“A Song” [NCP 357]. The sedentary suburban life is a regrettable end-result. The elegy is clearly intoned in the next poem, “From the Lookout Rock”, [NCP 327-8]:

Goodbye the roving of the land:  
The tumbling weed of all the West  
Engraves its shadow on the sand.

/

Venturers to the pole turn round  
And watch the southward cities fill  
With space as barren as their snow.

But, this same poem concludes with a direct protest:

Gods of the wind, return again,  
For this was not the peace we prayed;  
Intone again your burdened strain,  
And weave the world to harmony,

Longenbach reads this as part of Wilbur’s chastisement of 1950s American complacency [op.cit.,74-5]. Already, and it is only 1950, Wilbur has commented on the the necessarily interregnal nature of the Cold War. In “Driftwood” [NCP 321-2] this time of ‘dry abdications and damp complicities’ is set against the ‘royally sane’ timeless forms of driftwood, once ‘into masts shaven, or milled into oar and plank’, now wrought into ‘curious crowns and scepters’. They have been with the ‘gnarled swerve and tange of tides / Finely involved’ but have saved despite all their ‘ingenerate grain’. Here is the quintessential Wilbur voice, that which distinguishes his commentary from that of others, even from his Formalist peers; that sense of distance from his material that he is so careful to stress. The early drafts of the poem, as Longenbach has noted, had Wilbur assigning meaning directly to landscape, overly conscious of Whitman and Stevens. The emblematic qualities of the precisely observed natural object served the better to carve the metaphor of his meaning. There may, perhaps, in “The Good Servant” [NCP 299] be self-reproach at not having taken a more explicitly political role, when the poet’s ‘visored volition’ ponders the commands of ‘what were not impossible campaigns’. The line ‘Above the ceded plains’ echoes that in the hymn *America*: ‘above the fruited plain’, and gives the stanza a certain Columbian ring to it. Even more elusively allusive are the politics of “Castles and Distances” [NCP 289-91]. Besides its more obvious call to the poet to engage with the world, easily read from the references to Prospero and the Duke resuming their respective offices, there may be, in the same references, a call to America, ‘pardoning all’, to engage on a ‘less sheer’ basis with the rest of the world:

Pardoning all, ... Prospero,  
..., renewed  
His reign, bidding the boat prepare

From mysteries to go  
Toward masteries less sheer,  
And the Duke again, did rights and mercies, risking wrong,  
Found advocates and enemies, and found  
His bounded empire good,

Direct socio-political comment, where it occurs, can be surprisingly barbed, as in “Shame” [NCP 201], almost a parody of Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen” [CP, 201], except that in this case it is the citizens and not the authorities who are the subject of ridicule. The line ‘An odd impression of ostentatious meanness’ is as sharp as any in Swift. From the *Advice to a Prophet* collection of 1961, the poem may be directed at the supine passivity of America’s cold war allies. The poem also happens to be a notable demonstration of Charles Olson ‘Projective Verse’ breath-lines, though the poet might not wish to claim it as such. For a sting in the tail, the delightfully witty “A Fable” [NCP 33] contains just that, in its moral coda, after the inoffensive rattlesnake has had its brains dashed out by a ‘deftly flung pre-emptive stone’:

Too much defense-initiative  
Can prompt aggression

This, from the *New Poems* of the 1989 NCP, might well have been written during the rearmament programme of the Reagan era.

In “Speech for the Repeal of the McCarran Act” [NCP 268] the specific appeal against that anti-immigration measure splendidly uses Wulfstan’s metaphor:

The strong net bellies in the wind and the  
Spider rides it out  
But history, that sure blunderer,  
Ruins the unkempt web, however silver.

A living confidence in the web of America’s sensed identity will endure, and welcome will beget loyalty:

It is oathbreach, faithbreach, lovebreach  
Brings the invaders into the estuaries.

A rare application of Anglo-Saxon polity to that of the United States.

For genocidal tendencies emergent in America’s Vietnam war and the even darker shadow of WWII genocide, only elemental nature will suffice as root stock for Wilbur’s grafting of meanings. “On the Marginal Way” [NCP 121-122] is one of Wilbur’s longer stanzaic poems, and one stanzaically interesting in itself, in that each six-line stanza (as Wai, *Explicator*, Summer 1990 has pointed out) is divided into two halves, each linked by the fourth line, corresponding to the contention between observation and the imagination. Bedrock geology provides the analogy for the cataclysmic upheavals of the World War.



struggle, while at the same time they may, for brief stretches, be contrastingly rendered soft and fluent. [Butts, 119]

His unease with what he terms the ‘poster poem’ elicits from him the following:

My idea of a fine political poem is William Butler Yeats’ “Easter 1916”. ...  
[Yeats] makes it pretty clear that political fanaticism costs the heart of something...  
It is an extraordinary balancing act—Yeats’ poem—and if you went around with a brush and pasted it on the hoardings of a city, it wouldn’t move people to one kind of an action or another; it would move them to contemplation. ...  
[Butts, 66]

This is Wilbur’s clearest declaration of his conviction that a poem can gain authority through its author’s restraint. Auden in his 1936 rhyme-royal “Letter to Lord Byron” had cast a jaundiced eye on the age and, more particularly, on the poet’s delusion that he can make parnassian pronouncements on it:

As long as art remains a parasite  
On any class of persons it’s alright;  
The only thing it must be is attendant,  
The only thing it mustn’t, independent.  
[CP 101]

The anti-Shellyean cynicism here seems only partly Auden’s own; half-adopting a Don Juan persona. In Wilbur, the jaunty dismissiveness of rhyming couplets is equally well sustained—in his rendering of *Tartuffe*, for instance. Seeing the poet in his public role rather as an agent of society and *a servant of the language* [cf. Butts, 52-3], Wilbur prefers to let the tone of the language speak its author’s mind—as in the Molière translations—and, in his own voice, seeing ‘what ideas and words are alive’ [Butts, *ibid.*], letting the words by deft wordplay do the work, including the work of a public commentary counterpointed by oblique flashes of autobiographical introspection.

## CHAPTER V

### TRANSFORMING MEASURES

Wilbur's undertakings in translation have been largely ignored, or dismissed, as part of his original contribution to poetry. The poet's own persistence with this work, and the increasing share it represents of his total output, has likewise been seen as a waning of original talent. An alternative view, proposed here, is that the application of a that talent to world poetry creates something new for literature in English. 'Nothing reveals a poet's weaknesses like classical verse'. So writes Joseph Brodsky in his essay on Anna Akhmatova, "The Keening Muse". And that is why, Brodsky says, it is so 'universally dodged'. He might have been appraising the skill of Richard Wilbur, and not Akhmatova, when he continued, 'To make a couple of lines sound unpredictable without producing a comic effect or echoing someone else is an extremely perplexing affair'[Brodsky, *Selected Essays*, p.37]. Echoing Eliot on the 'ghost of metre', Brodsky adds 'This echo aspect of strict meters is most nagging, and no amount of oversaturating the line with concrete physical detail sets one free'—not even, one might venture the rejoinder, if one is William Carlos Williams. But Richard Wilbur is one who, like Akhmatova, as Brodsky says of her, 'from the outset knew how to exploit the enemy' [ibid.]. Wilbur has translated for publication just one poem of Akhmatova's, "Lot's Wife", from 1924. What Wilbur's

facility with rhyme does for the poem may be appraised from a comparison with the unrhymed translation in the Hemschemeyer *Complete Poems*. It is clear that both translations are line-for-line faithful to a denoted sense in the original. Hemschmeyer's and, presumably,

Akhmatova's 'anguish' speaks to the wife. Wilbur chooses to make 'wild grief' an external agent, with a voice of its own, in italics. The searing last view of Sodom causes her eyes to be 'welded shut by mortal pain'. This third stanza has from Wilbur a dramatic tautness contrived not least by the snaplock operation of the *abab* rhyme. Akhmatova's compassion for the 'unhappy wife' is afforded through Wilbur's inspired deployment of syntactical suspension in the final line a breathtaking finish: 'Who, for a single glance, gave up her life'. This is surely one instance where Wilbur, guiltless of a poem's content or lack of it, has enhanced our reception of the poem. That he does so with all fidelity to the original is tribute to his mastery of the craft. More pointedly, it demonstrates that 'mere' craftsmanship does more than present meaning; it creates meaning.

Krushchev, berating young writers at meeting in the Kremlin in 1963, shook his fist at Pasternak's pupil, Andrei Voznesensky, accusing him of "formalism", by which was meant, rather, experimentalism [Jay-Smith and Reeve, 1987, xv-xvi]. Wilbur's *NCP* contains five Voznesensky poems, three in the 1969 *Walking to Sleep* and two in the 1976 *Mind Reader*. Wilbur had toured in Russia in 1963 in a cultural exchange of the Kennedy administration and Voznesensky's work was prosodically formalist, up to the time of Wilbur's attention to it at least. The translations of the same poems in Jay Smith and Reeve's *Selected Poems* of Voznesensky are Wilbur's. One may assume that Wilbur is using rhyme and metre to effect, as with Akhmatova. Some other poems in the same collection are translated by Auden. These appear to bear Auden's irreverent, light-serious touch which one may suppose accords with the spirit of the unavoidably subversive originals. Only Auden could get away with the Byronesque straining after rhyme in the first stanza of "Parabolic Ballad"

Redheaded bohemian Gauguin the painter  
Started out life as a prosperous stockbroker.  
In order to get to the Louvre from Montmartre  
He made a detour all through Java, Sumatra,

[Vosnesensky, *An Arrow in the Wall*, p.45]

Similar ear-rhymes are apparent in the original, and Auden has clearly rendered their saucy intent if not their literal content.

Wilbur's choice among the Voznesensky poems must inform us. "Foggy Street" [*NCP* 168-9] has, for a poet given to frequent spaces on the hazy horizon of consciousness, a certain appeal:

As in a nightmare, everything is crumbling;  
people have come unsoldered; nothing's intact.  
/  
All's vague, as at a magic lantern show.  
Your hat-check Sir?  
Mustn't walk off with the wrong head, you know.

The lines might have come from Wilbur's own "Walking to Sleep". Wilbur's poem distrusts the self. Voznesensky's treads the fog of mistrust bred of the Soviet surveillance system where even loved ones could not be trusted; and even the self, too, at times was brought into doubt. Both poems speak to each other.

"Antiworlds" [*NCP* 170] is another concept close to the centre of Wilbur's preoccupations. Some lines from it, in fact, have the unmistakable interrogatory tone of the speaker in "Walking to Sleep":

In the middle of the night, why is it  
That Antiworlds are moved to visit?  
... A distinguished lecturer lately told me,  
"Antiworlds are a total loss."  
Still, my apartment-cell won't hold me;  
I thrash in my sleep, I turn and toss.  
And, radio-like, my cat lies curled  
with his green eye tuned in to the world.

—and not a little of the Wilbur night-walker's determination to pursue 'an ever-dimming course of pure transition' to, in Voznesensky's case, a reality alternative to the Soviet-created one. "Dead Still" [*NCP* 172], with all that that title might allude to in the Soviet context, resembles in its crustacean mutations nothing so much as Wilbur's own "Conjuration" [*NCP* 282]. Its wittily subversive pun must have proven irresistible to him:

Does each cell have a soul within it?  
If so, fling open all your little doors,

The direct appeal for free communication between people and peoples in "Phone Booth" [*NCP* 98] is sustained with the single, persistent rhyme on 'dial-tone' throughout the poem, as in the original. The sustained New-Critical ambiguity in the poem's utterances must have been, also, grist to the Wilburian mill.

Only in "An Arrow in the Wall" [*NCP* 100], the title-poem of the Voznesensky Selected Poems, does Wilbur take to a red-blooded, tooth-and-claw poetry not usually associated with his own. He does so with a plunging directness of language that, though it

must stem from the original Russian, and though it no more than replicates Voznesensky's rhyme scheme, has the stamp of Wilbur closure at the line-ends,

In public, we're barely friends,  
But for years it's being going on:  
Beneath my high-rise window  
Dark waters run.

A deep stream of love.  
A bright rapids of sorrow.  
A high wall of forgiveness.  
And pain's clean, piercing arrow.

The anaphora in that latter and last stanza is supplied by Wilbur and is not apparent in the original. In the second and third stanzas:

Your hand pulls back from the shoulder  
As if measuring cloth by the yard;  
The arrow pants, and is eager,  
Like a nipple extended and hard.

And now, with what feminine fury,  
Into the wall it goes—  
All the walls of the snug and secure.  
There's a woman in that, God knows!

Such an inimitably Anglo-Saxon term as 'cloth-yard arrow' can scarcely exist in the Russian, so credit for that pun must go entirely to Wilbur. And *eager* is a half-rhyme in the original, as it is in Wilbur's translation, adding bow-arm tension to the quatrain. The rhyming oath in 'God knows' is improbable in the Russian, nor is it there evident. Throughout the poem, Wilbur alternates feminine with masculine rhyme, playing on the male-female tension in the original, where that itself is a play in ambiguity between the arrow of poetic truth and the love-arrow.

What we have here, as we might expect, is a clothing by Wilbur of the denotative thrust of the original in a complete Wilbur wardrobe. The appearance of the resulting poem is all but Wilbur's. The speaking voice of the persona sounds now more like Wilbur than it could possibly be Voznesensky. While remaining technically and subjectively faithful to the original, Wilbur has yet managed to write an unmistakably Wilbur poem. Tribute is paid to Voznesensky. Laurel is earned by Wilbur.

Below the near-coincidence of titles in Voznesensky's "First Frost" and Wilbur's "Two Quatrains for First Frost" [NCP 217] lie lines that are revealing of each poet's poetic provenance. Wilbur sets his poem just at the moment of a first autumnal frost, and then offers these similes:

No leaf has changed, and yet these leaves now read  
Like a love-letter that's no longer meant.

Now on all things is the dull restive mood

Of some rich gambler who in quick disdain  
Plumps all on zero, hoping so to gain  
Fresh air, light pockets, and his solitude.

Voznesensky, too, speaks of the death of love

First frost. A beginning of losses.  
The first frost of telephone phrases.

It is the start of winter glittering on her cheek,  
the first frost of having been hurt.

[Voznesensky, *An Arrow in the Wall*, p.37]

This Russian frost is more biting; its victim, a girl freezing in a telephone booth, more vulnerable than Wilbur's New England gambler. Despite the similarities, one cannot imagine

either poet writing the poem of the other. Such is the difference in tone that Wilbur's translations—of which this is not one—must, and do, supply an additional element of response to language.

While Voznesensky had by 1987 begun writing in looser forms, dispensing with rhyme and using assonance sparingly [cf. Jay Smith, 1987, Introduction], Joseph Brodsky twenty years earlier had emerged as a new formalist. Seven years younger than Voznesensky, Pasternak's pupil, Brodsky was a protégé of the conservative Akhmatova. Already, by 1967, he was exhibiting an early tightening-up of poetic discipline, reverting in his latest poems to 'regular anapaests and iambics' [Bethell, 1967, p.12]—this is remarkable in itself, given that Auden in a foreword to a collection of Voznesensky poems noted that Russian verse 'seems to be predominantly trochaic or dactylic, whereas English falls naturally into iambic or anapaestic patterns' [Blake and Hayward, 1968, vi]—though Auden himself notes Brodsky's competence with iambics and anapaestics [Kline, 1973, p.9]. Bethell sees the influence of Akhmatova and Samuel Morschak in Brodsky's case, but nonetheless sees in him 'little of the formalistic but brilliant word-and-rhyme play' of Voznesensky [ibid.]. His poems are, moreover, again in the words of an Auden foreword, apolitical and stand outside the Mayakovsky tradition of 'public' poetry [Kline, op.cit., pp.11-12]. Wilbur has translated just two Brodsky poems, "Six Years Later" [NCP 13], and the enigmatic "The Funeral of Bobò" [NCP 96-7]; neither of which appear in Brodsky's selected poems to 1985. Anthony Hecht notices an 'ingenuity of metaphoric structure' in "Six Years Later" and credits it as an accomplishment on Wilbur's part to have translated a poem from the Russian in such a way as to allow the influence of Donne, of whom Brodsky was from early in his career an admirer, to exhibit itself in a 'modern and modulated way'.<sup>43</sup> Wilbur's attraction to the lament for Brodsky's young woman,

drowned, so the note says, ‘under mysterious circumstances in the Gulf of Finland’, may have something to do with Brodsky’s first two of three stanzas in section three of the poem:

Bobò is dead. Something I might convey  
Slips from my grasp, as bath-soap sometimes does.  
Today, within a dream, I seemed to lie  
Upon my bed. And there, in fact, I was.  
  
Tear off a page, but read the date aright:  
It’s with a zero that our woes commence.  
Without her, dreams suggest the waking state,  
And squares of air push through the window-vents.

Once again, we are in the hypnopompic zone where Wilbur is wont to loiter. The something that eluded Brodsky is the same something that Wilbur, in “Advice from The Muse” [NCP 30-1] says ‘Still, should escape us, something like / A question one had meant to ask the dead’ (and, though Edgecombe [ibid.,149] sees the ‘ever-present Berkleyan Deity’ in those lines, something more, rather, seems to be at issue; something like uncertainty as an indispensable sauce to knowledge). In any case, a morbid humour in the original of the Brodsky poem seems to have allowed Wilbur to put an Anglo-Saxon edge on his translation of it:

...You are nothing; you are not;

Or, rather, you are a clot of emptiness—  
Which, also, come to think of it, is a lot.

Bobò is dead. To these round eyes, the view  
Of the bare horizon-line is like a knife.

43. Hecht: “Master of Metaphor”. *New Republic*, May 16, 1988, p.30.

But neither Kiki nor Zazà, Bobò,  
Will ever take your place. Not on your life  
[NCP 97].

Not for the first time in Wilbur, as in that last line, a commonplace expression lends life to a pun. In the other poem, an unmatched passion in two lovers is matched by the searing final couplet of the last stanza:

So long had life together been that all  
That tattered brood of papered roses went,  
And a whole birch-grove grew upon the wall,  
And we had money, by some accident,  
And tonguelike on the sea, for thirty days,  
The sunset threatened Turkey with its blaze.  
[NCP 13]

The second perfective adjective in the second line goes by so quickly one almost misses the pun, a Wilbur hallmark. Why these two poems? Why the sorrow and passion, so little met in Wilbur’s own poetry? A surrogate outing? One thinks too highly of Wilbur’s ability to think him incapable of delivering himself of a like burden. Rather, Brodsky, who had lived

under, witnessed, and no doubt was kin in spirit if not in blood to some who had suffered physical and soul torture, legitimises the text for Wilbur to work upon. Interviewed about his Russian translations, Wilbur volunteered an admission he had already made elsewhere:

to translate someone is often an act of imposture in which you say something which you are not quite prepared to say in your own person, or to take a tone which is not quite your own. [Butts, 128]

The rider that Wilbur adds, ‘Yet you’d like to have that latitude in your own work before you’re through. And this gives you a little practice’, can sound excessively humble and almost parasitical, taken out of context. A later comment corrects that impression:

I certainly try to efface myself as much as possible. I shouldn’t like to seem to be demonstrating that Voznesensky could write like Wilbur if only he’d try. [Butts, 166]

The honest labour of a craftsman is all that he claims.

Brodsky in exile became a US academic, while Voznesensky remained behind, a licenced rebel. Wilbur’s affinity to them is clearly not political. They are younger men, somewhat. Most Russian poets, anyway, as G.L. Kline tells us in his note to his translations, make systematic use of rhyme, so much so that, in the case of Brodsky, who favours in addition much slant rhyme, Kline had to exercise economy in reproducing both. Wilbur revels in rhyme, especially semantic rhyme, and this Russian brand of formalism cannot have been without appeal for him. He longest held to an essentially unchanging course in the use of measure in his poetry; measure arrived at despite his declaration that most of his poems ‘are put together in the way in which free verse comes about’ [Stitt interview, 1985]. Despite, too, the efforts of at least one literary historian to pigeonhole him as one of a ‘New Rear Guard’ who in the late forties put up resistance to the postwar movement that looked to William Carlos Williams [Michelson, pp.13, 228], Wilbur’s lyric poems remain fresh and quirkily panoptic in his last collection. A poem previously published in pamphlet form in 1989, “A Wall in the Woods: Cummings”, was reported in *The Best American*

*Poetry 1999* be the title poem of a new collection, the first since *New Poems* appeared in *NCP*. A drawing in is suggested. The poet still gives interviews, and one of book-length is now printing. Even had the poet chosen not to add to the published poems now to his credit, his last collection completed a span that found at its other terminus the cables of prosodic suspension still securely anchored. Four decades of rapidly modern life had been surveyed by poetry in the interim. If Wilbur’s view holds; that a poem needs measure, but

must find its own, then Wilbur's projections of the gestalts of thinking life can add up to more than the sum of their stanzaic or stichic parts.

The poet's engagement in the translation of formalist, Soviet-era poets is notable in one whose own output of public poetry has been sparing. In his own opinion, "Advice to a Prophet", with "Speech for the Repeal of the McCarran Act" and the sonnet to Lyndon Johnson 'may exhaust my public or political poems' [Butts, 60]. Still, Voznesensky's "Foggy Street" [NCP 168], with its delicious black-humour sallies at the citizen informants and surveillance culture of the police state, mocks political correctness in inimitably American idiom:

Your hat-check, Sir?  
Mustn't walk off with the wrong head, you know.

The formalism alone of the Russian poets cannot be the attraction to one who declared 'I hate the word *formal* verse, because it sounds so ladyschool, you know' [Butts, 76]. And disdain for mere formalism is evident in a remark on Baudelaire, incidental to a response on his translations from the French 'I'm not much attracted to the rondeau sort of thing—to those doilies of poems' [Butts, 74]. Affinity with protest poetry, Soviet or otherwise, is improbable in the poet who confessed in 1972 'I don't like, can't adjust to simplistic political poetry, the crowd-pleasing sort of Anti-Vietnam poem' [Butts, 92]. Notably, an intention to translate the outspoken Yevtushenko had not materialised in print as of the appearance of *NCP* [cf. Butts, 112]. Speaking of his Voznesensky translations, he says

because I feel some sort of affinity with him, or at least with the particular poem  
I am rendering, *can* use such words as readily come to me without imposing myself  
on the work. [Butts, 166]

Creation and and disclamation in one breath. In a further comment in the same interview, Wilbur tells of his distress at hearing friends say of another of his translations, That's a nice Wilbur poem, strongly influenced by Jorge Guillén. 'I had no such sense of it' he insists [Butts, 167]. His description of his approach to the translations from the Russian would seem to contradict this self-impression:

I need someone to sit down with me, go through the whole poem, read it  
to me in the Russian, translate it into rough English, and then answer all  
sorts of questions for me as to what the rhythm's doing and what the overtones  
of particular words are. Then I can settle down and write it as if it were my own poem.  
[Butts, 112]

Despite his own preferred formula of 'thought-for-thought' faithfulness and despite, in the case of Brodsky, a subject who was wont to insist on metre, word, and rhyme faithfulness

[cf. Butts, 194, 250], it seems that the poet underestimates his own powers of alchemy over languages unfamiliar to him.

Wilbur's translations from the French now form a substantial body of work which, far from being a diversion from his vocation as a poet in the English language, is the basis for a separate reputation. Wilbur began work on *The Misanthrope* in 1952, has translated Racine, and is reported to be working on his eighth Molière verse drama, *L'Étourdi*. His defence of his decision to retain Molière's rhyming couplets, from his introduction to *The Misanthrope*, is illuminating of Wilbur's own attitude to the worth of these devices:

The constant of rhythm and rhyme was needed, in the translation as in the original, for bridging great gaps between high comedy and farce, lofty diction and ordinary talk, deep character and shallow. ...while prose might preserve the thematic structure of the play, other "musical" elements would be lost, in particular the frequently intricate arrangements of balancing half-lines, lines, couplets, quatrains, and sestets. There is no question that words, when dancing within such patterns, are not their prosaic selves, but have a wholly different mood and meaning.

[Dramatists Play Service text, 6]

Words *are not their prosaic selves*. They seldom are, too, in the poetry of Richard Wilbur. A continuation of the same passage reveals something else:

When Molière has a character repeat essentially the same thing in three successive couplets, it will sometimes have a very clear dramatic point; but it will always have the intention of stabilizing the idea against the movement of the verse, and of giving a specific rhetorical pleasure.

[*ibid.*, 7]

*Stabilizing the idea against the movement of the verse* contains an echo of Frost's contention that 'The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless'. Frost was enlarging on his theme that "the sound is the gold in the ore". Wilbur engaged in an exercise to sustain that idea over a full dramatic work in unrelieved iambic. As he makes clear in his introduction to *Tartuffe*, the next Molière work attempted, rhyme and verse, which, in the form of the the couplet had served as a conveyor of courtly epigrammatic effects in *The Misanthrope*, continue to be required for other dramatic reasons:

*Tartuffe* presents an upper-bourgeois rather than a courtly milieu; there is less deliberate wit and elegance. ...rhyme and verse are required here for other good reasons: to pay out the long speeches with clarifying emphasis, and at an assimilable rate; to couple farcical sequences to passages of greater weight and resonance, and to give a purely formal pleasure, [Harvest edn., x,xi]

Though he gives a specific scene, the “ballet” movement at the close of Act II, as justification for the last claim, *a purely formal pleasure* is, surely, for all the pointed wisdom, not the least attraction of a work by Molière, or one by Wilbur.

Ian Hamilton’s review of *NCP*, which took such exception to Wilbur’s poem about Sylvia Plath [Chap.II, “Echoes and Parallels”], was, besides, particularly dismissive of Wilbur’s output of translations:

[Wilbur] was being drawn more and more to translation as a means of energizing his technical adroitness and his brilliant way with words. He had begun to scratch around for things to take off from. . . .In middle to late Wilbur there is an almost constant sense of skills that have become habitual, enabling the poet to drone on rather prettily, to keep talking so long as the rhyme supplies hold out. [*TLS*, Sept.15-21 1989, 999]

Wilbur’s translations of Racine’s *Andromache* and *Phaedra* had immediately preceded the publication of *NCP*. On the matter of rhyme supplies holding out, an extract from the introduction to *Phaedra* is instructive:

. . .the alexandrine is replaced by our corresponding English meter, the pentameter.  
. . .English meters are more emphatic and less flowing than the French; too long a sequence of end-stopped English lines, especially if rhymed, can sound like the stacking of planks in a lumber-yard. [Harvest edn., xv]

On technical adroitness, Wilbur adds this:

And as for sound, I must say something about the celebrated sonority of Racine. Since French does not sound or move like English, a translator who sought to duplicate the “music” of certain famous lines in *Phaedra* would in the first place fail, and, second, would doubtless slight the matter and tone, which are primary in all writing. What one must do, I think, is to try throughout for equivalent effects of significant sound and pacing in the key of English, and remember always that one is seeking to be worthy of a magnificent ear. [*ibid.*, xv, xvi]

Robert Lowell had published his translation of *Phaedra* twenty-five years before, in 1961.

A critic, disapproving, wrote:

Far too often, it strives against the grain of Racine’s style and against the conventions of feeling on which the miraculous concision of that style depends. . . .  
The greater the poet, the more loyal should be his servitude to the original  
[Michelson, 233]

On fidelity, Wilbur had this to say:

English rhyming is more emphatic than French rhyming, so that a translation into English couplets will more often have the whip-crack sound of joke or epigram than the original did, ...Formal fidelity entails that slight and

unavoidable infidelity.

[*The Catbird's Song*, p.175]

The critic conceded that Lowell's translation had other merits to balance its defects. Wilbur declares his informed servitude to the original, yet his faultless cadences compose themselves with such assured ease that, should a line be disputed, one could doubt the original itself.

## Chapter VI

### TIME OUT OF MIND

Timeless, unpeopled locations abound in Wilbur's poetry. It is as if the figures have been edited out of the scenes in order to remove topicality. A sort of 'thought-lapse' lexical photography is applied, as here to one New England landscape and townscape; the landmarks themselves not the primary object of poetic concentration, yet in no way coyly disguised. *Colonial*, uttered by an American, means the thirteen original colonies westward of the New England seaboard, as in:

Letting the eye descend from reeking stack  
And black facade...  
You see the freeze has started in to crack  
(As if the city squeezed it in a vice)  
And here and there the limbering water shows,  
And gulls colonial on the sullied ice  
"A Glance from the Bridge" [NCP 312]

The play on *frieze/freeze* after the ‘black facade’, the ordnance and nautical puns in ‘limbering’, and the gulls ‘colonial’, all tease the curiosity to know which New England town this is. Later references to a ‘hemmed-in river’ and the ‘barriered air’ confirm, of course, that it is Boston, where the Charles River is dammed between Boston and Cambridge. The ice floes are grandly enough conjured to carry the conceit of the river as ‘ancient whore’ revealing, in the Spring thaw, its ever-renewing freshness. We are free to impute what allegories we will, for the cycle of life, the renewal of hope, for nature resilient in the face of everything. Such studies recur in the poetry, and both presage and echo the long, mind-travel monologues. In “All That Is” [NCP 38-9], almost forty years later, Wilbur’s eye, insistent on seeing in what is, that which is beyond, takes flight to higher physical and metaphysical altitudes than ever before. The fact that the metaphysical eye is peering out through the window panes of a commuter bus in another New England town is just what gives the poem its arresting force:

Twilight approaches, ...  
   .. its first star  
 Enters the eastern suburbs...  
 /  
   ...through evening traffic and beneath  
 Checkered facades, a many-lighted bus,  
 Pausing or turning at the intersections,  
 Goes intricately home.  
 /  
   ...in the common dark  
 Between the street-lamps and the jotted sky,  
 What now takes shape?

What takes shape for Wilbur is phantasmagoria. The arcane and incongruous words of the commuter’s crossword-puzzle come to life and form a mad tableau in stained-glass on the heavens ‘between the street lamps and the jotted sky’. A flight of ernes (sea-eagles) rising from aits (islets), tracking across esker and arête contend with Charles Lamb (obliquely), with surrealist painting, and Hindu scripture. A suburban door is firmly shut on such dreamings, however:

A door is rattled shut, a deadbolt thrown.  
 Under some clipped euonymus, a mushroom,  
 /  
 Strews on the shifty night-wind, rising now,  
 A cast of spores as many as the stars.

The bus went *intricately* home through the *common* dark, to *clipped* euonymous. Here is a dreamland alternative to the suburban Waste Land. Wilbur ‘decomposes’ the tired dreamer’s light-headed reverie into the ‘ABCs of everyday’ and adds some lines on the

‘hidden webwork of the world’—to the same effect as these remarks, from “The Persistence of Riddles”, which might well sum up the poem:

Not only does a riddle offer, once we have solved it, a yoking of supposedly unrelated things; it also obliges us, in the process of solution, to strike out across the conceptual grid which our minds have imposed on the world  
[Wilbur: *The Catbird’s Song*, p.45]

Curious, that Wilbur, dubbed the ‘poet of suburbia’ by Horace Gregory, should express, albeit indirectly, such impatience with it, with excessive preoccupation with the here and now.

In “Wellfleet: The House” [NCP 319], he seems more at home in a setting which has a longer claim on time:

The walls awake with sumac shadow,  
/  
The portraits dream themselves, they are done with seeing;  
Rocker and teacart balance in iron moods.  
/  
    ...at certain hours a wallowed light  
/  
    ...lays on all within a mending blight,  
/  
One is at home here. Nowhere in the ocean’s reach  
Can time have any foreignness or fears.

This is not the individual concern with Bergsonian duration time, as in Woolf’s *The Waves*. The past here maintains a secure enclave in the present. So does our present colonise the future.(Edgecombe sees in the lines also the Berkeleian property of suggesting the perception of things without a human percipient [ibid., 56]). The stately treatment of time in “Wellfleet” is followed shortly by a more sprightly treatment in “Year’s End” [NCP 302], with a bouncy *abbacc* rhyme scheme to match. The same concern is presented with a future perspective:

These sudden ends of time must give us pause.  
We fray into the future, rarely wrought  
Save in the tapestries of afterthought.  
More time, more time. Barrages of applause  
Come muffled from a buried radio.  
The New-year bells are wrangling with the snow.

A witty parody of Goethe’s reputed last words and the auditory pun in the last line signal that here is no postcard sentimentalism. The overwrought metaphor and alliteration of the lines irritate at first, until one examines the rarer meanings of ‘rarely’ and ‘wrought’ (the poem’s policy, so John Reibetanz tells us, is one of ‘utter verbal exploitation’).<sup>44</sup> The muffled *barrages* of applause from the snow-buried radio is yet another Norman Rockwell image, echoing other barrages, in the Alsatian snow. The radio age itself is about to be

buried in the America of 1950. ‘These sudden ends of time’, as at Pompeii, are a correlative of the end of another era of civilization, one which was about to end literally and symbolically in ashes at the time of Wilbur’s wartime visit in 1944. A faint echo of ‘The burnt-out ends of smoky days’ from Eliot’s *Preludes*, perhaps of ‘the smoky candle end of time’ from *Burbank with a Baedeker; Bleisten with a Cigar*, settles among the ashes, but Wilbur’s is a contrary affirmation, rejecting despondency by force of historic example.

By the time of Wilbur’s third collection, in 1956, time and telepathy fuse in “The Mill” [NCP 276]; time is toyed with, as perception is in Stevens’ “Jar” and “Blue Guitar”. The ‘sovereign anecdote’ of the dead subject, who ‘found / Time all alone and talking to himself / In his eternal rattle’, is made into a haunting image that needs not supply any metaphor. From time, Wilbur leaps to spatial time, in “An Event” [NCP 274]:

As if a cast of grain leapt back into the hand,  
/  
Like a drunken fingerprint across the sky!  
/  
                                  ... refusing to be caught  
/  
                                  ... in the nets and cages of my thought

These vivid images set up the poem’s winged conceit:

It is by words and the defeat of words,  
Down sudden vistas of the vain attempt,  
That for a flying moment one may see  
By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt.

44. Reibetanz, J., “What Love Sees: Poetry and Vision in Richard Wilbur”. *Modern Poetry Studies*, Buffalo, NY: 1982, 11:1-2, p.69.

The fusion of time and vision is again addressed in “The Beacon” [NCP 249]

... Watching the blinded waves  
                                  ...we hear their  
Booms, rumors and guttural sucks  
Warn of a pitchy whirl  
At the mind’s end.

Thoughts cohere in Wilbur’s own poems around a focus-object as, at the end of the poem, around the ‘sighted ship’ on the fitfully illuminated dark sea of the mind. The poem invites comparison with James Merrill’s “Swimming by Night”. Where, in Wilbur:

A beacon blinks at its own brilliance,  
/  
Then in the flashes of darkness it is all gone,  
/  
                                  ...and the dark of the eye  
Dives for the black pearl,  
Of the sea in itself.

—in Merrill the conceit is compounded by one of Wilbur’s favourite tropes, that of drifting into sleep; and Merrill’s swimmer is larded about with as much word-play as anywhere in Wilbur:

A light goes out in the forehead  
Of the house by the ocean,

The descent begins:

Without clothes, without caution  
Plunging past gravity—

Mind and body detach and rejoin:

Wait! Where before  
Had been floating nothing, is a gradual body  
Half remembered, astral with phosphor,

Yours, risen from its tomb  
In your own mind

The resurrected body is spirit-like:

new-limned

By this weak lamp  
The evening’s alcohol will feed  
Until the genie chilling bids you limp  
Heavily over stones to bed,

Merrill’s concision has appeal—five quatrains to Wilbur’s eight—as do his subtle *abab* off-rhymes. Wilbur admits the whole swirl of the sea into his poem, and a slapping fourth-line rhyme. The pay-off is the joyous shout of his water-treading survivor at the end:

a sighted ship  
Assembles all the sea.

The Mind itself is for Wilbur the central concern: its operations, its susceptibilities.

That concern is most succinctly expressed in the eponymous “Mind” [NCP 240]:

Mind in its purest play is like some bat  
That beats about in caverns all alone,  
Contriving by a kind of senseless wit  
Not to conclude against a wall of stone.

/

The mind is like a bat. Precisely. Save  
That in the very happiest intellection  
A graceful error may correct the cave.

The ‘senseless’ wit is what saves the poet from existentialist conclusion.

Where, in “At Grass”, Larkin may have seen a moral on earthly fame and adulation in post-imperial tristesse, Wilbur’s superannuated “Horses” [NPC 191] graze as symbols for serene reflection:

Nothing disturbs them now.

/

Serene now, superhuman, they crop their field.

These are quite different beasts. Larkin's thoroughbreds, who 'have slipped their names', once sported silks. Wilbur's, courtesy of Jorge Guillén, are workaday animals, as, Wilbur suggests, is man. The horses, who cannot perceive it, partake of 'heaven's pure serenity'. Man, who can, cannot because of by his busy consciousness. Wilbur's statement is made in a Petrarchan sonnet with a Shakespearian end-couplet. The form satisfactorily contains his metaphysical idea. Larkin's six double-tercet stanzas are peopled with, albeit departed, parasols and 'squadrons of empty cars'. Absent, abstract Man, is Wilbur's addressee. The voice is, in acknowledgement of the other poet, not quite Wilbur's own; the word-play kept to a minimum, the tenor of the piece sombre. The question, unwaveringly, is the same Berkeleian one which underlies so much of his poetry: what of perceived reality is pre-conceived, and what can perception add to it? An answer is essayed at length in "The Mind Reader" [NCP 106-110]:

...a photograph  
 Misplaced in an old ledger,  
 /  
 ...glistens with the fixative of thought  
 [ibid., NCP 107]

Auden concurs:

Flash-backs falsify the Past:  
 they forget  
 the remembering Present.  
*I Am Not a Camera* [CP 841]

Things are mislaid, and thoroughly so, Wilbur posits, as in the case of:

...a pipe wrench, catapulted  
 From the jounced back of a pick-up truck

The landscape, in its bushy culverts and rocky escarpments, and the 'printless' sea which blandly accepts all thrown into it, are repositories of the mislaid. The mind, in Wilbur's effective comparison, 'is not a landscape'. The unlettered seer with his overburdened mind, stands for the collective folk-angst which troubles any race:

...my sixth  
 And never-resting sense is a cheap room,  
 Black with the anger of insomnia,  
 Whose wall-boards vibrate with the mutters, plaints,  
 And flushings of the race.

[NCP 109]

What can be wiped from memory? the seer asks. 'Not the least meanness, obscenity, humiliation, terror... or pulse of happiness'—the poet ventriloquises. The lay confessor, burdened with the guilty disclosures of his people, resorts to 'drinking studiously until my thought / Is a blind lowered almost to the sill', and wishes his too-busy consciousness was as inaccessible as the resting places of the lost wrench, wind-snatched hat and drowned

book. If Wilbur is making a statement that it is not only his own past which ways on the seer/poet, but also the collective past of his race (cf. Edgecombe, 123), he has chosen an elaborate and darkly entertaining way of saying so. His one-year sojourn in Italy, in the fifties, supplies the required plausibility of his characterised persona. The poet is stating a plain fact, that ‘poetry after Auschwitz’ cannot simply fall silent. The images transmitted by modern communications have inscribed the modern consciousness, and the modern conscience, rendered the more sensitive thereby, has placed a correspondingly greater burden on its poets. The poet, driven almost to distraction by this, is wont to wish himself permanently resident in that Berkeleian state of pure consciousness, but, like the mind-reader, must content himself to lower his consciousness to the sill of the world—almost.

#### THE WEAVE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In seeming paradox, Southworth [op.cit.] claimed for Wilbur that he had

restored to metrical poetry the subtlety that was being squeezed out of it as the iambic foot gained dominance... it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth [century] that this foot put a stranglehold on poetry, particularly American poetry.

—and then, commenting on Wilbur’s diversion from original work in favour of translations, concluded that Wilbur reminded him of

Ezra Pound, who was only at his best when he had the thought from another, such as Propertius, and needed only to furnish the technique.<sup>45</sup>

Ironic, that one who might be said to have salvaged the iamb, if not the pentameter, after that ‘first heave’, should be compared with Pound. This was before *Walking to Sleep* in 1969 and the *New Poems* collections of 1976 and 1987. Anthony Hecht, who had the advantage of reviewing *New and Collected Poems*, complimented Wilbur on his courage in acknowledging the defeat of words, in “An Event” [NCP 274]—from his 1956 collection, *Things of This World*:

It is by words and the defeat of words,  
Down sudden vistas of the vain attempt,  
That for a flying moment one may see  
By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt.<sup>46</sup>

The more relaxed, seemingly casually-chosen titles and themes of the *New Poems* collection of 1987 reveal nothing of the elegiac or valedictory (the Auden elegy “For W.H. Auden” is dated by Michelson back to 1975).<sup>47</sup> The first poem appearing in that latest

collection, “The Ride”, [NCP 4-5] takes its place in the succession of Wilbur’s dream poems. On dreams, Wilbur has said:

The “dream aesthetics” in my work would be most obvious in such a poem as “Walking to Sleep,” which derives from a sort of exploratory dreaming which I experience.<sup>48</sup>

“The Ride” reminds one of nothing so much as Walter de la Mare’s “The Listeners”, but only in the mood and setting. The surface narrative is one that is Wilbur’s own: the aesthetics of dream psychology:

I rode with magic ease,  
At a quick, unstumbling trot  
Through shattering vacancies  
On into what was not,

A stormy night, an inn, and shelter—for the horse; what lies behind the psychosis? The language in itself betrays nothing; it is phrased in a deliberate trot, freed from the burden of carrying more than its own sense. The saying is in the unsaying. There is an unlikely analogy in “Wyeth’s Milk Cans” [NCP 25], also in “New Poems”. The still composure that is the characteristic ‘look’ of any Wyeth painting is celebrated for what it is: a record of lived life, told in the grooves of a dirt-track, in the creased faces of an old farm-couple, in the hardy

45. Southworth: “The Poetry of Richard Wilbur”, *College English*, October 1960, p.29.

46. Hecht: “Master of Metaphor”. *New Republic*, May 16, 1988, p.25

47. Michelson: (1991) *Wilbur’s Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time*, pp.204,237

48. Wilbur: *The Catbird’s Song*, p.157

squint of a WWI German veteran-turned Pennsylvania homesteader. The halting trimeter of iambs, stumbling on trochaic substitutions of ‘Harden’ and ‘Wheel ruts’, shatters altogether in the final image:

What if these two bells tolled?  
They’d make the bark-splintering  
Music of pure cold.

What Wyeth’s paintings say in their unsaying, is what words fall short of. Wilbur’s words here leave to the imagination what only it can supply. MacNeice hears that same untolled peal in a moment of time-stopping love:

The bell was silent in the air  
Holding its inverted poise—  
Between the clang and clang a flower,  
A brazen calyx of no noise:

*Meeting Point* [CP, p.168]

References to the struggle for supremacy between the intellect and the imagination never far away in the *New Poems*:

This is no outer dark  
But a small province haunted by the good,  
Where something may be understood  
/  
We keep our proper range,  
Aspiring, with this lesser globe of sight,  
To gather tokens of the light  
Not in the bullion, but in the loose change.  
*Icarium Mare* [NCP 20-1]

He is a type of coolest intellect,  
Or is so to the mind's blue eye ...  
/  
Yanking imagination back and down  
Past recognition to the unlit deep  
*Trolling for Blues* [NCP 29]

Have all be plain, but only to a point  
/  
Something should escape us, something like  
A question one had meant to ask the dead,  
/  
Some fadings of the signal, as it were,  
/  
That slight uncertainty which makes us sure.  
*Advice from the Muse* [NCP 31]

Of "Shad Time" [NCP 35], Bruce Michelson has written: 'this is how pastoral poetry has grown since Frost'.<sup>49</sup> Where the Frostian allegory for life's choices was thoroughly plashed about with New England undergrowth, Wilbur's ever-present theme, for which he reserves

49. Michelson: (1991), op.cit., p.222.

his most arresting metaphors, is signalled unmistakably in stanza 2:

The shadblow's white racemes  
Burst here and there at random, scaled with red,  
As when *the spitting fuse of dreams*  
*Lights in a vacant head* [italics added]

Right from the beginning, oppositions are in play between the hemmed-in river-surface and the inverted thrust of the 'sky-depth cold and blank'. The 'mesh' of sight is engaged to order the scene with an artist's perspective grid. Yet, contrarywise (a bow, surely, to "West-Running Brook"), a boulder stands out, 'atilt in whittling spray'. That it is a musically 'scored' boulder jutting from the bedrock of the Orphean underworld is just a reminder that we are dealing here with poetry about poetry. Drinking from a stream, as Frost did from a well, Wilbur sees in "Hamlen Brook" [NCP 41], as might be expected, substance in shadows:

A startled inchling trout

Of spotted near-transparency,  
Trawling a shadow solider than he.

This very Wilbur trout proceeds, by way of ‘flicked slew’ and ‘glittering silt’, to *butt* out of view. Language is floundering here, splendidly. Head down, under a ‘white precipice / Of mirrored birch-trees’. Drunk with inverted vertigo, he quips ‘How shall I drink all this?’ Frost affected an enchanted delusion to penetrate, for once, the alleged blandness of his own perception: ‘Truth? A pebble of quartz?’ [“For Once, Then, Something” (*Collected Poems of Robert Frost*, p.276)]. Wilbur’s concern to give due regard to visual delights skims through five quatrains before ending in a modest Ode to Joy:

Joy’s trick is to supply  
Dry lips with what can cool and slake,  
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache  
Nothing can satisfy.

Where the persona in Frost’s poem is carefully inscribing an allegorical recollection, Wilbur is brushing quick impressions that symbolise the mind’s happy teetering, ever on the brink of fancy.

Contrasting Auden’s earliest poems with the late ones, Jarrell itemises in the early poetry twenty six forms of grammatical and syntactical aberration which Auden permitted himself in what amounted to a ‘private language. ...a concrete, laconic, and eccentric variant of ordinary English’ (Howe points out that, with a certain liberty, one might take Jarrell’s list as a list of the characteristic linguistic features of Old English poetry).<sup>50</sup> In the later poems, Jarrell notices the language becoming weaker and the rhetoric stronger. Effect by incongruity is applied, in Auden’s case inversely, by the insertion into concrete contexts of relatively abstract words from other discourses. Juxtaposition of disparate adjectival coordinates is another usual Auden formula, and a variant of the same technique. Such rhetorical display in the later Auden is indulged to the extent that, as Jarrell says, ‘Auden was like someone who keeps showing how well he can hold his liquor until he becomes a drunkard’. Jarrell’s startling conclusion however, is that it was *necessary* [Jarrell’s italics] for Auden to develop *and depend upon* [italics added] all this rhetorical machinery, because his poetry and his thought was becoming abstract, public, and prosaic. This was the price Auden paid, so Jarrell concludes, for making his poetry accessible.<sup>51</sup> Richard Wilbur’s poetry does not trouble itself so with public access. There is consequently less strain on the language, which remains retains an even tempo, working the words, as always. Where, in *New Poems*, language is adequate, it is deployed on chance and even frivolous occasions. These are, rather, essays on accreted significance: “Leaving”, on the insidiousness of the outward identities we assume; “The Catch” on the psychology of

male/female communication; “Transit”, on *sic transit*, and, reaffirming his calling to praise, “Hamlen Brook” on joy itself. If one is the look-out for signs of poetic self-indulgence in the last collection for some time of a poet now approaching his eightieth year, what is found instead is an undimmed capacity for sharp focus on the things of this world, that they may *signify*.

Wilbur’s preoccupation with the liberation of the thought-processes experienced in the moments of drifting into or emerging out of sleep is already evident in the early poem “For Ellen” [NCP 388]:

On eyes embarked for sleep the only light  
Goes off, and there is nothing that you know  
So well, it may not monster in this sea.

A fixation with the colour blue, the colour of thought—the colour of the imagination also, with Wilbur as with Stevens—is evident: ‘utter blueness’, ‘bestowing blue’, ‘blue heal-all breaks the paving stone’; and, searingly, ‘That casual fire will blister blue’—upon which, ‘night / Will strand its fears’. This child’s eyes see as yet with the piercing clarity of innocence. Later, ‘a starker sight / And newer darker love’ will throw stronger highlights but darker shadows. The area of the shadows will be explored in Wilbur poems over and over. If one is to go by his pronouncement that ‘What I have to say has best been said in my poems. ...in discussing or expounding them I necessarily dilute and falsify’ [Responses 117],

those darker poems must be explicated solely from their own opaque texts.

50. Howe, N., “Praise and Lament: The Afterlife of Old English Poetry in Auden, Hill, and Gunn” in Baker and Howe, *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998, pp.299.

51. Jarrell: *The Third Book of Criticism*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, pp. 131-3.

“The Agent” [NCP 149] might appear somehow unsatisfactory as agent and as a poem.

One is left wondering why eighty lines should be expended so inconsequentially.

Michelson

ascribes to it the subject of ‘self-loss in imaginative habit rather than imaginative free rein [op.cit., 89]. Nemerov’s “The Spy” is a cerebral geode focussed on the same cosmic truths that engage Wilbur in “Icarium Mare”:

Beyond the eye of Palomar, out there  
/  
It spies upon the true appearances of  
Our sensible world

[CP 502]

And Auden’s sonnet “The Secret Agent” is suitably more cryptic, and its closing line-and-a-half makes mordant joke on sleeplessness—might be read, really, as a fourteen-line allegory for the subject that Wilbur treats with splendid panache in “Walking to

Sleep”. Curious, that Wilbur’s spy should be so literally just that. Or is it? Is it, as J.D. McClatchy writes of John Hollander’s poem “Reflections on Espionage”, ‘an uncanny trope on the business of dream work’?<sup>52</sup> One expects from an agent a double game. And from one in the service of Richard Wilbur the chances are that, under interrogation, that game turns out to be the familiar one of espionage on consciousness. Consider:

Behind his back, the first wave passes over  
The city which at dawn he left for good,  
His staff-car musing through the streets, its tires  
Kissing the rainy cheeks of cobblestones,

If the ‘city left at dawn’ may be read as the city of subconsciousness, the ‘sub’ in subconsciousness becomes ‘subterfuge’, and we are in the shadowy world of deception. The very opening words, ‘Behind his back,’ should alert us to a play on our surface perceptions. The staff car ‘musing’ through the streets is a cerebral one, cruising the neural back-streets of the mind. The sleep conceit is signalled again in the next lines:

Till at St. Basil’s gate the tower clock  
Roused with a groan, flung down an hour, and shook  
The tears into his eyes. ...

A transferred epithet may be assumed in that ‘roused’. A curious echo of the ‘direct downright sound’ of the tower clock of Big Ben in *Mrs Dalloway* follows.<sup>53</sup> There must be some connection between the ‘rainy cheeks’ and the tears. It becomes easier to decode after that:

. . . In those lapped roars  
And souring resonance he heard as well

52. McClatchy, J.D. “Some Footnotes to my Dreams”, in Townley, R., ed., *Night Errands: How Poets Use Dreams*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998, pp.149.

53. Woolf, V. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, pp.52.

Hoarse trains that highball down the world’s ravines,  
Some boat-horn’s whoop and shudder, all sick thrills  
Of transit and forsaking.

A sour taste in the mouth, and possibly hoarseness too, are an inevitable consequence of too many ‘highballs’. The ‘whoop and shudder’ are the ‘sick thrills’ of retching—after which, as one might expect,

Now he is calm,  
Here in this locust-copse, his rendezvous,  
Laying his uniform away in leaves  
For good, and lacing up a peasant jerkin.

The spy’s undressing and dressing match the erstwhile sleeper’s. The locust-copse has simultaneous connotations of the vegetation, and therefore camouflage, stripping insect, and of the North American leguminous tree with its hanging clusters of white flowers and reddish-brown seed pods, which might be taken to be suggestive of a parachuting figure.

The sustained conceit now colours with striations of daybreak

The sky fills with a suave bombination  
Of yet more planes in level swarm; ...

Bombination is a buzzing; bombazine a shot, or cross-streaked, silk-weave fabric. The image of a dawn bombing raid is vivid; the buzzing in the head an invading of day-thoughts,

evoked in throbbing unease. A poem should not be paraphrasable, Wilbur has said.

...the city  
Rocks now with flash and thud; the guildhall windows  
Blink him a leaden message, that the small  
Park, with its fountains, where his custom was  
To sip a *fine* and watch the *passeggiata*,  
Is deep in rubble and its trees afire.

St Basil's gate, the guildhall, and *fine* and *passeggiata* place the agent in two, possibly three locales at once, or two or three locales in one, as may be, in a dream. The poet spent time in Italy during and after the war and had by the time of the poem's publication toured Russia in a cultural exchange of the the Kennedy administration. The geographic concreteness becomes vague again

But still he looks away, less now from grief  
Than from a fuddled lostness how unlike  
The buoyant spirits of his coming, when,  
Light as a milkweed-puff, his parachute  
Fell swaying toward a flashlight in a field  
Of moonlight grain, which softly hove to meet him.  
Bedded that night amongst the bins and kegs  
Of a damp cellar, ...

One might look away from a lurid dream in 'fuddled lostness', and recall how, after a binge, one had sunk swaying like a milkweed puff into insensibility, and bedded for the night amongst bins and kegs. The spy-film imagery is here so brilliantly executed that it seems almost ungracious to insist on persevering with the dream conceit, and the former becomes even more foregrounded:

he did not rehearse  
His orders, or the fear that some small flaw  
In his forged self or papers might betray him,

He did not rehearse the fear that some small flaw in his *forged self* might betray him. All of us present a forged self when asked for our papers (as in MacNeice's grippingly noir presentation of such a scene in *Conversation* [CP, p.184]). Only the trained agent is alertly conscious to moment-by-moment risk of exposure. Like the rest of us, he craves moments of relaxation, away from scrutiny:

But lay rejoicing in the smell of roots  
And age, as in a painted cart next morning,

Hid under hay, he listened to the ching  
Of harness and the sound of rim-struck stones.

There is some half-hidden half-allusion here to the Miltonic *gilded car of day* [*A Mask*, 95], but it is the wrong time of day. Moreover, cartridge cases too, like the flints of cobbled pavé, are also rim-struck. The cart-ride is succeeded by a train-ride—a morning commuter train will serve to connect to the routine of the the prevailing conceit:

And then that train-ride!—all compartments filled  
With folk returning from the holiday,  
From bonfire-jumping, dancing in a round,  
And tying amulets of mistletoe.

Misteltoe is a partial parasite, and is a Eurasian evergreen but has North American relatives.

The tropical American mistletoe cactus is, notably, not parasitic. It is the agent, however, who is parasitic, and who takes sustenance from the authenticity of the co-passengers of his dream.

Like some collector steeped in catalogues  
Who finds at last in some dim shop or attic  
A Martinique *tête bêche* imperforate  
Or still unbroken egg by Fabergé,  
He took possession, prizing the foreknown  
Half-Tartar eyes, the slurring of the schwa,  
The braids and lederhosen, and the near-  
Telepathy of shrugs and eyebrow-cockings  
In which the nuance of their speeches lay.

The *tête bêche* is, of course, the ace of spades, the trump card; but the Czar's egg might be said, in the metaphorical sense, to have been emphatically broken. The schwa is a central vowel and has, in English as well, a less distinct quality than peripheral vowels. It is equivocation that is embraced. The conceit grows thin as the agent proceeds farther and farther from the realm of sleep:

Rocked by the train, with festal smiles about him,  
His belly warmed by proffered *akvavit*,  
He felt his hands fill with authentic gestures:  
He would not shift his fork from left to right,  
Nor bless himself right-shoulder-foremost. Born  
Not of a culture but a drafty state,  
And having, therefore, little to unlearn,  
He would put on with ease the tribal ways  
And ritual demeanours of this land  
Toward whose chief city he was chugging now  
To savor and betray.

The 'drafty state' might possibly be a crude pun on the draft-divided America of the late 1960s. The proffered water-of-life, aquavit, draws from the counterfeit creature a willing

simulation of authentic humanity. Some sort of monstrous breakfast is contemplated, but is interrupted:

But now a torn  
Blare, like the clearing of a monstrous throat,  
Rolls from those fields which vanish toward the  
border;  
Dark tanks and half-tracks come, breasting the  
wheat,  
And after them, in combat scatterment,  
Dark infantry.

*Barbarossa* images (half-tracks are definitely WWII) can only be deeply allegorical in some way. The cereal references to wheat, and to 'bulk foods' in the passage that follows, are clue enough to remind us of the continuing conceit of a groggy subject, groping to full wakefulness.

He can already spy  
Their cold familiar eyes, their bodies heavy  
With the bulk foods of home, and so remembers  
A gravel playground full of lonely wind,  
The warmth of a wet bed.

There we are, back in bed.

How hard it is,  
He thinks, to be cheated of a fated life  
In a deep *patria*, and so to be  
A foundling never lost, a pure impostor  
Faithless to everything.

The riddle of the foundling never lost, the oxymoron of the pure imposter, the catholicity of the typographical *trompe l'oeil* in 'faithless to everything', all imitate the agitated state in which one sometimes wakes from the bizarre insolubilities of a troubled dream.

An ill thought strikes him:  
What if these soldiers, through some chance or  
blunder,  
Have not been briefed about him and his mission?  
What will they make of him—a nervous man  
In farmer's costume, speaking a precious accent,  
Who cannot name the streets of his own town?  
Would they not, after all, be right to shoot him?  
He shrinks against a trunk and waits to see.

This is the mute terror of those dream situations where we are unable to articulate our innocence, in some improbable predicament, of the malfeasance alleged against us. One might almost append Auden's conclusion:

*They would shoot, of course,  
Parting easily two that were never joined.*  
[CP 32]

Auden's 1928 sonnet is taut and tense; a black-and-white microfilm eyed with the cold-blooded detachment necessary to the profession; a black joke on sleeplessness. Nicholas Howe has pointed out that this last line of Auden's is a translation of the close of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the most baffling of all Old English poems, and that only the trained reader may be expected to get the allusive clue, since the reference belongs—legitimately in the context—to the discourse of the trained spy who here represents the trained reader.<sup>54</sup>

Wilbur's robust defense of hard-working and not merely decorative literary allusions [cf. *Responses*, 31] may be called to Auden's defence against the charge of obscurity in this case, while he himself is guilty of no literary obscuration: the code is Cold War, readable enough by anyone who lived through it. The Wilbur poem is protracted, like that war; his agent's cold-war troubled conscience troubling our own and winning for him some of our sympathy, however confused his cause. Sandwiched in the same volume between "On the Marginal Way" and "Walking to Sleep", the poem does the work of both on a single, thin conceit. It does not lose by comparison with either, nor are the other poems diminished by comparison with it. Being less rich in digressionary material, "The Agent", a long work by Wilbur's standards, is more spare and therefore more illustrative of his deft and deceptive skill.

Quite apart from the major mind-explorations of "Walking to Sleep", "The Mind Reader" and "In Limbo", driftings into sleep or dream are a recurring trope. In "Poplar, Sycamore" [NCP 381] the 'tattered lights' playing on the sycamore's 'patchy bark' are invoked to 'Baffle the sight to sleep' In "Two Songs in a Stanza of Beddoes" [NCP 366], similarly, 'tender winter' is appealed to, to 'weep this raving earth to sleep'. In yet another

54. Howe, N., op.cit., pp.297.

ostensible 'nature poem', "Clearness" [NCP 313], the overwhelming detail of nature observed, occasions another willing disappearance into an Alice-like underworld, as when a 'huge precision' of leaves has amazed the poet's eyes and 'closed them down a dream'. In "Beowulf" [NCP 216], in what could conceivably be construed as an allusion America's obsessive fear of the newly-emerged communist atomic power, Grendel's marauding becomes a daytime, as well as a night-time terror: '...and a child, / Grown monstrous, so besieged them in the night / That all their daytimes were a dream of fright'. In "Wellfleet, the House" [NCP 319] we are told, curiously, that 'The portraits dream themselves, they are done with seeing'. And, at the close of "A Baroque Wall-Fountain" [NCP 273], all transcends to 'the dreamt land / Toward which all hungers leap, all pleasures pass'. In the tripartite meditation that is "Marginalia" [NCP 266] 'men compose / Daily, unwittingly,

their final dreams'. In the "Beasts" nocturne [NCP 263] a gull dreams 'in the guts of himself'. In "The Beacon" [NCP 249] the 'beacon' conceit dissolves by the third stanza into an introspection which employs a simile, something Wilbur rarely has resort to, to foreground a state which he famously has recourse to: the 'veiled' state of consciousness as we hover between waking and sleeping: 'veiled as voices nearly heard / In morning sleep'. The consciousness-explorations become, now, more overtly structured: in "After the Last Bulletins" [NCP 241] a whole city 'founders' to sleep and returns 'by subway-mouth' to morning life again. Most famously, in "Love Calls us to the Things of This World" [NCP 233]: 'spirited from sleep, the astounded soul / Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple / As false dawn'. Auden's 'disenfranchised' spirit wakes in a darker mood:

Recalled from the shades to be a seeing being,  
From absence to be on display,  
Without a name or history I wake  
Between my body and the day.

*Horae Canonicae I*: "Prime" [CP 627]

Wilbur's spirit or soul, which 'shrinks from all that it is about to remember', accepts in 'bitter love' the waking body, and follows the call of love for the things of creation. Auden's sets off on a dream-like trudge through the canonical hours which adds up to what is, just as Nathan A. Scott says of Wilbur's "Walking to Sleep": 'a horrific account of the ordinary landscape of the soul'.<sup>55</sup>

Bruce Michelson memorably comments on it as a poem 'offering complex instruction in the craft of irrationality... verses laced or land-mined with half-jokes' [op.cit., p.85, et seq.].

Taking a serious, dark view of the hypnagogic advice uttered by the Wilbur persona in the

55. Scott, Nathan A. Jnr. "The Poetry of Richard Wilbur—*The Splendour of Mere Being*",  
Christianity and Literature, Vol.39, No.1, Autumn 1989.

poem, Michelson thinks that there are 'mustered reasons' for considering "Walking to Sleep" to be Wilbur's "Skunk Hour"—were the poem not so 'patently or damnably witty at every second turn'. No doubting the darkness in the poem, nor the spiritual reassurance in the references to Christ on Galilee and to John 15.16: "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you".<sup>56</sup> After the breathless commentary up the the first apostrophe 'What, are you still awake?' the speaking voice takes pity and begins to soothe the sleepless one:

... let your head heel over on the pillow  
Like a flung skiff on wild Gennesaret.  
Let all things storm your thought with the moiled flocking  
Of startled rookeries, or flak in air,  
Or blossom-fall, and out of that come striding  
In the strong dream by which you have been chosen.

[NCP 161]

And then: ‘Are you on the roads again?’ The voice further reassures, and guides past:

... groves which are not you  
But answer to your suppler self, that nature  
Able to bear the thrush’s quirky glee  
In stands of chuted light, yet praise as well,  
All leaves aside, the barren bark of winter.

—past the hanged footpad, nightmare: ‘a man moored in air’, to arrive finally, like Quixote, at repose:

... . Long errantry perhaps  
Will arm you to be gentle,

—safely past the skunk hour. Philip White, more explicitly, reads “Walking to Sleep” as Wilbur’s quarrel with Poe, played out in allegory. Of the quarrel itself, White thinks the following:

...it seems more likely that he is attacking a strand of aestheticist solipsism that stems from Poe through the symbolists to the modernists and postmodernists.<sup>57</sup>

At stake in the quarrel, White had noted, are crucial questions of modern poetry concerning the relationships between ‘spirit and flesh, idea and thing, self and other, aestheticism and didacticism, surrealism and realism, dream and rational consciousness’. Pointing out that the speaker/guide in the poem passes through two distinct modes of response to the world—a

bifurcation which White claims most critics who have discussed the poem have either missed or given little attention to—he finds that not only does Wilbur in the course of the poem do battle with the spirit of Poe, but ‘invokes and revises or rejects’ also Wordsworth, Frost, Eliot and Stevens. This Wilbur does in his ‘essentially modernistic quest for an

56. White, Philip. “*Walking to Sleep* and Richard Wilbur’s Quest for a Rational Imagination”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 1995, Winter, Vol 41, No.4. pp.257.

57. *ibid.*, p.260.

adequate imaginative response to contemporary experience’[*ibid.*, p.251]. White finds that the second section of the poem advances a Berkeleian view of reality, as something essentially mind-dependent—at any rate in the second, corrective section which urges us to ‘praise as well, / All leaves aside, the barren bark of Winter’, and the ‘jetsam beauty’ bequeathed us by the stars. The closing references, to Vishnu (“The god who dreams us”, as White notes, from “In Limbo”) enfold Berkeley’s concept of everything subsisting in the mind of some Eternal Spirit. White’s reading, carefully structured from allusive correlations to Poe, Stevens and Frost, and which takes as its starting point the view that the poem is Wilbur’s revision of Frost’s “Directive”, does not seem to accord weight to the subversive humour of Wilbur’s language in itself. The puckishly cheerful, betimes superstitiously cautious admonitions are, however, a unique prescription against confusion.

141 lines of blank verse from Wilbur must attract intense scrutiny for signs of departure from his erstwhile decorous norm. The depth of its debate does not stop Wilbur, as Michelson has noted, from relishing his usual word-play; indeed, the sheer delightful fantasy of the allegorical progress affords him with additional scope. The apostrophised ‘You’ will, most readily, ‘Step off into the blank of your mind’ and, flattered a little later at what the ‘deft needle of your eye appoints’, not mind having been led nodding, Titanic-like, ‘through nothing like a fogbound prow’. One makes one’s way, imperially, past Potemkin barns in ‘inching’ court-shoes. The landscape is a bleak. ‘Champaign’ is a college-town in Illinois, mocking the poet’s own state appearances; a battlefield in its older French meaning [White]. What follows is Kafkaesque transmogrification, with stalinist NKVD overtones: ‘Detach some corner of your thought to guard / The outside of the building. ...slough all memories at every threshold’. This subterranean journey leads to a choice of entombment alive in the pyramid of Cheops, or some unspecified fate in the ‘vacant barracks’. This is dream-world, of course, and rational continuity is becoming increasingly disconnected. A teetering window-ledge ships water, one is underwater and on dry-land at the same time—in an antique cityscape of Roman tufa, where one might expect to find ‘cloacal halls’, though not in boarded-up hotels. The descent, the longer part of the poem, is more readily associable with Poe mind-travels than are the spiritual exhortations of the latter part, coupled as they are with Wilbur’s own Berkeleyian detachment. The references to ‘a flung skiff on wild Gennesaret’, to ‘the strong dream by which you have been chosen’, and a play on the commonplace expression ‘God knows where’, together with concluding references to Vishnu and Maya, respectively the Saviour incarnate and the Hindu concept of the world of the senses as an illusion—all may seem no less escapist. Something in the final words: ‘all images whatever / ...unfathomed, taken as they came’ seems, in opposition to Poe, an invitation to accept the physical as an aspect only of the metaphysical, but to accept the physical at any rate.

And yet, contrary to all the evidential content, Jensen insists that “Walking to Sleep” is ‘in part a poem about the writing of poetry and not merely a jumble of dream images’ [Salinger, 250]. In his explication of his own “dream aesthetics”, as he terms them, in “A Note on Poetry and Dreams”, from his prose miscellany, *The Catbird’s Song* (1997), he says that ‘the drifting, linking, and swerving of my poetry is often modeled—even where I strive for a conscious clarity and point—on the flow of consciousness in a dream.’ Dream as thought-muster is an organizing concept that, in a way, validates Jensen’s contention: the poetry is not so much about the flow of dream consciousness as *that* is consciously

what inscribes the poem. Wilbur states in the “Note” that “Walking to Sleep” derives from ‘a sort of exploratory dreaming’ which he experiences. But the obsessive intensity of Berryman’s claim to have analysed a dream to ‘forty-three structures’ [“Dream Song 327”] is entirely absent from Wilbur’s engagement with dream-consciousness. A closer parallel is found in section 1/24 of John Hollander’s “Reflections on Espionage”:

the enciphered  
Text is lovelier and more mysterious  
Than when obscured by layers of opaque sense.  
[p.10]

If that whole poem is a trope on dream work, as McClatchy says, its overt recurring theme is the validity of language itself. It is also, like Wilbur’s sleep-walking poem, about the full-time business of writing poetry: ‘The work goes on under cover of living’ [1/25]. More, Wilbur’s poem is, like it, about the same restless, sleep-denying task:

What you hope for  
Is that at some point of the pointless journey,  
/  
The kind assassin Sleep will draw a bead  
And blow your brains out.  
[NCP 160]

Hollander’s agent, “Cupcake”, sends messages in apophthegmatic bursts:

Transmitting the truth is always a problem.  
Facts we can encipher,  
[p.18]

No case is ever  
Finished, but only abandoned  
[p.19]

Hollander and Wilbur are joined here by Heaney who, allowing for his own inescapable allusions in “From the Republic of Conscience”, learned that ‘no ambassador would ever be relieved’. Spears (1992) describes Auden as Wilbur’s Virgil ‘insofar as there was a Dantesque pilgrimage’.<sup>58</sup> Wilbur elsewhere has expressed a regret that he did not know Italian well enough to essay a translation of the Divine Comedy (though a translation of *Inferno* Canto xxv appears in the 2000 collection, *Mayflies*), but the jaunty tone he adopted in his own underworld journey suggests a mind focused resolutely on this, rather than on the consequential afterlife.

Wilbur makes for his longest poem, “The Mind Reader” [NCP 106], his highest claim: that he had sought to make, through its central character, ‘a failing gesture toward the idea of God’s mind’.<sup>59</sup> Mary Kinzie, suspecting that more is afoot than appears, comments:

Wilbur has never been the sort of poet who contentedly and voluminously  
wastes our time talking himself over the prosaic mudflats until he should

reach some slender ‘major’ utterance.<sup>60</sup>

In her review of the title poem in *The Mind Reader* collection, she is content to state that ‘the chief imaginative accomplishment of this poem is the rendering of the quirky, subjective mind as a place like the world into which things can disappear’, but concedes that, despite the ‘thirst for godlike rest and intelligence without effort, which almost makes the mind-reader an existential nag,’ the mind-reader ‘does have something important to say about mind, feeling, the poetic faculty’. Bixler sees “The Mind Reader” as negating the positive note of “Walking to Sleep” and pronounces a short verdict on the poem: ‘Vision is constrained by cynicism’.<sup>61</sup> Neither Bixler, Kinzie, nor Michelson, who devotes a chapter to Wilbur’s longer poems, make reference to Wilbur’s declared intention concerning the poem. Dorothy Judd Hall [ibid.], who does, is concerned only to establish a link with Frost. Forearmed with that knowledge, they might have settled upon these lines as the key to the poem:

And skeptics bent on proving me a fraud  
For fear that some small wonder, unexplained,  
Should leave a fissure in the world, ...  
[NCP 108]

It is the argument of Ejner J. Jensen, which Michelson has picked up, and extracts in a note to his own commentary on “Walking to Sleep”:

In most of Western Literature, rational man is viewed approvingly and his triumphs celebrated. More recently, particularly in poets who reject modern society, the higher

58. Spears, Monroe K., *Countries of the Mind*. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1992, p.114.

59. Video interview with Sigmund Koch and Rosanna Warren, D. Judd Hall in Wilcox, E.J., *Essays on Robert Frost in our Time*, Victoria, BC, Univ. of Victoria Press, 1974, pp. 75-6.

60. Kinzie, M., “The Cheshire Smile on Richard Wilbur” *American Poetry Review*, May/June 77.

61. Bixler, Frances. *Richard Wilbur: “Hard as Nails”*. Conway, AR: Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association. 1985 Fall, 11:2, p.10.

value attaches to instinctual man, to man in nature. In a way, each of these answers is false; certainly they are both too easy. The more daring vision is the one that maintains the paradox and confronts it with full awareness of its extremes.<sup>62</sup>

“The Ride”, already mentioned, is an actual dream of Wilbur’s, not an imagined one,<sup>63</sup> but is nonetheless employed as a dream-conceit:

The horse beneath me seemed  
To know what course to steer

Michelson’s interpretation of the “The Ride” is large and satisfying:

One believes in the dream horse because one must... this poem is the acknowledgment, the nurture, the blanket and stall one can offer to the imaginative side of the self

[ibid., 202].

The obvious connection is expressed by Michelson as ‘another wise and troubled extension of a Frost conceit; seeming to pick up where “Stopping by Woods” took off’ [op.cit., 201]. These are reassuring words, for a 1970 review of Wilbur’s poetry had concluded that:

Like Frost, Wilbur will admit that the woods of complex reality are lovely,  
dark and deep; but won’t go into those woods. . . .Frost, when harassed,  
fell back on an unexamined Emersonian belief that life was, after all, basically  
good. Wilbur is too honest. . . .instead, he offers us nothing.<sup>64</sup>

Wilbur is as silent on the actual object of the allusion, though, as was Frost:

How shall I now get back  
To the inn-yard where he stands,  
Burdened with every lack,  
And waken the stable-hands  
  
To give him, before I think  
That there was no horse at all,  
Some hay, some water to drink,  
A blanket and a stall?

Something rather more than the despair of the imaginative self upon waking from an engrossing dream would seem to be at stake here. Claiborne Park sees no reason not to plump for salvation, as being as valid an allegory as any other.<sup>65</sup> The poet’s own claim that the dream is actual disarms us, but his working of it sets up legitimate expectations. There is a stray reference to ‘the clean horse of our courage’ in “Advice to a Prophet” [NCP 183]—Wilbur reuses motifs. Claiborne Park also recognizes allusions to Roland and to Achilles in the poem. Michelson sees the blanket and stall as the offering to the imaginative self [op.cit., 202]. There is no reason that these readings should be mutually exclusive.

62. Michelson: (1991), op.cit., p.231.

63. cf. Claiborne Park, Clara. “Called to Praise: Richard Wilbur’s Brilliant Positive”, *Christianity and Literature*, Vol.42, No.4, Summer 1993, p.551.

64. Johnson, K. “Virtues in Style, Defect in Content”

65. Claiborne Park, *ibid.*, p.552.

One might consider more closely the line ‘burdened with every lack’. Claiborn Park acknowledges that the ‘transparent directness’ of the language in “The Ride” may have been harder to achieve than in the swoopings of swallows and bats. The very transparency challenges interpretation. Transparent language and off-page referents is one Wilbur remedy for the ‘defeat of words’ (“An Event” NCP 274).

“In Limbo” [NCP 63] which the “Note” in *Catbird’s Song* says ‘has to do with the conversing of all one’s selves and ages in the hypnopompic state’ is just that: scenes and selves from the poet’s past life succeed one another. How is it we can in the moments before full wakefulness doubt the most permanent facts of our existence: ‘For a half-

kindled mind. . . How to know when one is, or where?’ The ontological *when* almost slips by unnoticed. Not so the arresting question in stanza four:

Is there another lying here beside me?  
Have I a cherished wife of thirty years?

And what other facts of our existence, this seems to say, have been striving to assert themselves while our waking self could be caught off-guard? It is notable that trademark Wilbur word-play is underplayed in this poem, in contrast to “Walking to Sleep”. The language is, instead, insistent; struggling for clear recall. This is in contrast to another Hollander poem, also from the early seventies, “The Head of the Bed”. Hollander’s poem might, taken on its wordplay, have been written by Wilbur:

Heard through lids slammed down over darkened glass,  
Trees shift in their tattered sheets, tossing in  
Shallow sleep underneath the snoring wind.

A dream of forests far inside such sleep  
As wakeful birds perched high in a dead wood,

Brooding over torn leaves, might mutter of

Rises over the pain of a snapped twig

[*Selected Poems*, p.59]

The sustained arboreal conceit introduces a fifteen-section poem which, on Hollander’s own

admission, contains only one scrap of an actual dream [Townley, 1998, pp.66] and, unlike “In Limbo” or “Walking to Sleep”, does not directly speak in, or refer to the poet-persona.

But Hollander’s night-for-day inversions in the final section pursue an ‘ever-dimming course of pure transition’ just as Wilbur’s sleepwalker does:

The bright moon offends him: he plucks it out;  
He opens all the seals of touch: he hears  
The whirlwinds of his breathing; then it comes:

A last waking to a trumpet of light  
From warm lamps turns him over gravely toward  
Her long, bare figure, Lady Evening,

Who, while he lay unwaking, rearranged  
Oddments of day on a dressing table,  
Lowered gentle blinds, letting the night dawn,

[*Selected Poems*, p.64]

Hollander’s 1974 blank verse, as regular as one could wish, and deployed in tercets and quatrains is form in the service of figuration. Wilbur frog-marches his insomniac subject without stanzaic intermission through “Walking to Sleep”, makes examination of a guilty sub-conscience in “In Limbo” —culminating in the confessional conceit of the third

stanza—and moves on, back to *abab* quatrains with hooved, anapaestic/dactylic alternations in “The Ride”, to an icy but never parodic echo of the early Wilbur:

Till the weave of the storm grew thin,  
With a threading of cedar-smoke,  
And the ice-blind pane of an inn  
Shimmered, and I awoke.

We know the storm, and its weave. Form and measure, in the best metaphysical tradition, are in the service of a conceit; the conceit itself dictated by the disjointed logic of dream. These poems of vivid dream-scenes, and of scene-haunted insomnia in the case of “The Mind-Reader”, are answer enough in Wilbur’s “quarrel” with Poe; are a steady and controlled focus on the instabilities of the mind where fancy, far from being idle, wears instead a frown of concentration. That they should occupy such a high line-count in aggregate suggests that the poet has here revisited a project on poetry written at limits of coherent thought. The question of why such a project should so occupy a poet otherwise so given to lucid lyric is answered best in the sharply surreal imagery on which a narrator ever cross-examines himself and us.

## CHAPTER VII

### TRUE TO FORM

‘The modern poem’, writes Wilbur in his essay: “Round About a Poem of Housman’s”, ‘is a machine that can run on any fuel whatever’ [*Responses*, 19]. The deliberate echo of Williams’ assembly-line definition of a poem implicitly challenges that definition, and though

Wilbur’s note to “A Fire Truck” makes no reference to Williams, there is an uncanny coincidence of imagery.

W.C. Williams' *The Great Figure*:

I saw the figure  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded

becomes, in Wilbur:

Right down the shocked street with a siren-blast  
That sends all else skittering to the curb,  
Redness, brass, ladders and hats hurl past,  
Blurring to sheer verb,

*A Fire-Truck* [NCP 207]

This first stanza alone might stand as reply to Williams, taking the great Modernist at his word and constructing a machine made of words or rather, in this case, collapsing a machine into words. Wilbur is not, of course, like Williams (as in the latter's introduction to *The Wedge*, 1944) content to 'Let the metaphysical take care of itself', and predictably continues:

...I carry you into my mind,  
Ladders and brass and all, there to admire  
Your phoenix-red simplicity, enshrined  
In that not extinguished fire.

*Mind, admire, enshrined, fire*, as John Reibetanz says, mime the creative process, and the heavy enjambment of the stanza conveys the unabated momentum of the mind.<sup>66</sup> The verbal

technique is, as one comes to expect in Wilbur, flawless. The brand-iron effect of the poem's imagery is the result of technique riding on sheer original imagination. The technique, however, results in what Edgecombe describes—with some justification, it has to be admitted, as 'a can of writhing metrical worms' [op.cit., 98]. Williams's essays "The Poem as a Field of Action" and "On Measure" call attention to 'a revolution in the conception of the poetic foot' [SE 281] and yet insist 'the only reality that we can know is

66. Reibetanz, J., "What Love Sees: Poetry and Vision in Richard Wilbur". *Modern Poetry Studies* 11, 1982, p.78.

MEASURE' [SE 283]—in the form of a 'relatively stable foot, not a rigid one.' [SE 340] Between the epitrite and the paeon, especially if modified by the Trager-Smith notation of 1951 [cf. Hobsbaum, 1996, pp.7], there is certainly room for just that 'rubber inch' which Donald Davie dismissed in Williams' metrics. Wilbur, in his essay 'The Bottles Become New, Too' [*Responses*], refuted Williams' contrary assertion about new wine. A misshapen metrical bottle despite its stanzaic form and simple rhyme scheme, "A Fire-Truck" is just

that successfully non-prescriptive use of form which delivers felicitous effects without self-consciously theoretical stylistic foregrounding.

The theoretical challenge to the New Critical paradigm on which Wilbur continued to produce such brilliant variations is articulated by Joseph M. Conte (1991), who has argued from close analysis of postmodernist poetics, particularly those of Ashbery and Zukofsky, for, in Ashbery's case, for the merits of 'procedural' form and, in Zukofsky's, of 'serial' form. Quoting Ashbery (from Lehman, 1987) on the arbitrary constraints of form having "paradoxically liberating effect", Conte explicates:

the new method of proceduralism ...rejects the concept of a form superimposed on preexistent content; instead, it proposes a system of arbitrary constraints which functions as a generative device... Formal choices thus precede content, and the arbitrary constraints are relied on to generate, not contain, the material of the poem [ibid., 40].

Where New Critical standards expected craft in a poem to exhibit a natural ease, postmodernist procedural form proclaims its artifice. Ashbery, according to Conte, has 'renovated the sestina in order to fully exploit the generative capabilities—the compounding dynamics—of its lexical recurrence' [ibid., 42]. That the generative dynamics of the sestina were already well known to Dante, is not denied by Conte, who cites his aphorism "la battaglia delli diversii pensieri" [ibid., 169]. The repetition of end-words as lexical constants whose semantic import and contextual value must appear different on each outing [ibid., 170,189] is recurrence in the service of the *retrogradatio cruciata*, in which Conte credits Zukofsky with discovering the 'most appropriate form in which to express the coincidence of several thoughts' torsion, winding around themselves in the head' [ibid.,190]. Ashbery's renovation of the form, as already noted, is at the expense of referentiality. Zukofsky's comes with a six-page interpretation in verse of the necessity of selecting the sestina form for the subject [ibid., 187]. The organicism of Zukofsky's "An Interpretation" accompanying his sestina "Mantis" is seen by Scroggins (1998) as fundamentally at odds with the the very formal structure it tries to explain [ibid., 321]. If the sestina of the objectivist Zukofsky is, as Scroggins proposes, not merely sestina as available form but 'an inevitable outgrowth of the patterns in the poet's mind' [ibid., 319], it is difficult to see what in this proceeding is different from the intuitive discovery of form in and by content, as Wilbur has said is the norm with his own poetry. Conte, in fact, declares flatly: 'in Zukofsky, the content discovers an appropriate form' [ibid., 188]. Wilbur, for his part, while citing Elizabeth Bishop as among the happy exceptions, has remarked that most sestinas impress him as 'forced and tiresome' [Butts, 119].

Scroggins emphasizes Zukofsky's strivings to write poetry as fugue; that is, a self-regenerative procedure rather than a finite form; a procedure where counterpoint upon taking on a definite form of its own becomes in the notation of *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* "countersubject", yet not to the exclusion of "episode" unrelated to either subject or countersubject [ibid., 194-5]. Conte, more specifically, identifies the predominance of recurrence—distinguished from mere repetition—as a 'paradigmatic figure displacing metaphor' [ibid., 189]. Scroggins concedes that Zukofsky's notion of objectivity in poetry 'bears some resemblance to the New Critics' conception of the poem as a free-standing and self-sufficient object, a "well-wrought urn". In distinguishing Zukofsky from the 'New Critics' (employing the common usage which fails to make the distinction that New Criticism was a method developed for the appraisal, not the writing, of poetry) Scroggins points to his 'emphasis on the phenomenological nature of objectification. ...the "rested totality" the mind obtains in apprehending the poem' [ibid., 99]. It is curious that Conte and Scroggins both end their books with chapter-titles identically prefaced 'A Polemical Conclusion'. Conte promotes 'seriality' and 'proceduralism' as antidotes to the new New Formalism [ibid., 282]. Scroggins appears to urge Zukofsky as a role-model for what he terms a Paterian *Anders-streben*: a continual straining away from mere matter and subject towards a non-representational ultima [ibid., 322]. Whether or not the postmodernist picture continues to look more and more abstract or tends to the condition of collage, the *ostranenie* of the discrete poems of Richard Wilbur continues to successfully resist the automatization and algebraicization of perception.

*I hope that I have written some poems that are successful in respect to completely consuming the form and turning it wholly to expressive purposes.* With this statement, from a 1962 interview [Butts, 6], Richard Wilbur might be said to sidestep the matter to which Zukofsky devoted a whole life. Chance subjects uncomplainingly bear the burden of expression. It is the coming upon the Wordsworthian inward eye of sudden, oddly felicitous fancies that gives Wilbur's poetry the seemingly natural lightness by which subject-matter skates across a form as thin and transparent as ice itself. The momentary inspiration that quickened with angels the limp puppets of a washing-line is justly famous. As the washing is detached temporarily from its wearers, so the poet stretches a comparison to their souls:

The soul shrinks  
From the punctual rape of every blessed day  
/  
The soul descends once more in bitter love  
To accept the waking body'



Have kept composure,                   in thoughtless honour  
 Talk under torture.                   like captives who would not  
 Where the dump displays            Tossed from a tailgate  
 Its black barrows                   its random dolmens,  
   and blazing valleys

[NCP 185-6]

Paul Fussell, who praises Wilbur's superior skill as a metrist,<sup>67</sup> writes, citing this poem as an example:

each significant philological change projects us into an altered metrical world  
 in which the meters of the past can be understood and appreciated but never  
 again practiced.<sup>68</sup>

Wilbur, contrarily, has said in *Responses*, pp.220-1, that the rhythms of Beowulf may flourish again 'if enough poets get interested'. Their application here would seem to vindicate Wilbur's determination to "include every resource which can be made to work" and to "try to play the whole instrument" [ibid., 123], and demonstrate that some of the most powerful chords can yet be wrung from very old instruments indeed.

That the good grain  
   be discovered again.

This plea for appreciation of true worth so vividly, indeed luridly conjured, invites dark rumination about true worth as it may be found anywhere. Yet, Donald Hill, faulting the poem for 'banality' in the details of description and condemning the central conceit as 'forced and unconvincing', names the poem as 'one of Wilbur's rare failures'—although he thought the presence of Old English rhythm, syntax and diction effective in "Driftwood" [NCP 321] which, like "Junk", employs the same metaphorical thread of "ingenerate grain".<sup>69</sup> Contrarily still, Joseph Summers describes "Junk" as 'the liveliest recreation of Anglo-Saxon meters and feeling since Pound'.<sup>70</sup> J.D. Niles, while praising Pound's rendering as 'technically a *tour de force*' and recognizing that "The Seafarer" has 'done

67. Fussell, P. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1979, p.100.

68. Fussell, *ibid.*, pp.65-66

69. Hill (1967) *op.cit.*, pp.73,147.

70. Vinson and Kirkpatrick (1981) *Twentieth Century Western Writers*, p.491.

more than many scholarly tomes to excite modern students to the beauties of Old English Poetry' finds in it 'tortured word-order', 'archaic inflections', and 'bizarre vocabulary'. Of other modern forays into the metre, Niles is scathing of C.S. Lewis's attempt to illustrate his essay "The Alliterative Metre", considers Tolkien's sequel to *Maldon* 'formal and

literary’ and while acknowledging Auden’s “The Age of Anxiety” as ‘ruthlessly modern’, finds its diction ‘too often strained and precious’ and the whole piece delivered in a note of sour irony. While making no reference to “Lilacs”, Niles adjudges Wilbur’s poem “Junk” to be ‘the only other attempt to write modern English poetry systematically in the old alliterative form’, and notes with approval that Wilbur ‘handles the alliterative line with a good deal of freedom, particularly in his toleration of alliteration on the fourth stressed syllable of the line’. Moreover, Niles asserts that Wilbur’s poem shows that ‘an uncompromising modern diction... can be accommodated to something like the old alliterative form’.<sup>71</sup> Implicitly, this is not merely the only other attempt, but the only successful attempt to date. Roberta Berke, also approving, notes that Wilbur does not slavishly follow the Anglo-Saxon model, wisely not imposing its strict metres or its kennings. Giving the full mythological gloss on Hephaestus and Wayland, Berke comments that while neither reference is vital to a superficial comprehension of the poem, looking up the references adds dimensions. Her choice of a full transcript of “Junk” to represent Wilbur’s poetry reinforces her concluding comment:

While his poems do not go off limits with new forms, explosive subjects or forbidden passions, their high concentration of images causes the reader’s vision of reality to implode into a new world as wide and surprising as a first look through a microscope.<sup>72</sup>

Curious, that the most successful resuscitator of Anglo-Saxon verse should have translated so relatively little of it directly. Raymond Oliver says that Wilbur ‘rightly’ omitted from his collected poems the passage translated from lines 210-24 of *Beowulf* [Salinger, 216] and Nicholas Howe, with particular irony, cites Wilbur’s “Beowulf” itself: ‘its intricately rhymed six-line stanza’s (*abbcac*) suggest why Wilbur has been so inspired a translator of Molière but has never ventured a *Beowulf*’.<sup>73</sup> The *Beowulf* lines 210-24 (the voyage to Denmark), and 2669-84, 2688-93 (the climax of *Beowulf*’s encounter with the dragon), are

71. Niles, J.D., “Old Alliterative Verse Form as a Medium for Poetry”, *Mosaic, A Journal for Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 1978, 11, No.4: 19-33.

72. Berke, R., *Bounds out of Bounds, A Compass for Recent American and British Poetry*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp.16-21.

73. Howe, N., “Praise and Lament: The Afterlife of Old English Poetry in Auden, Hill, and Gunn” in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, Baker, P.S. and Howe, N., London, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998, p.296.

Wilbur’s only published translations from Old English. He chose to translate “The Whale” not from the Old English of the Exeter Book, but from the *Middle English Bestiary*. The Old English “Whale” has phrasing and a word-hoard reminiscent of the sea and mere passages of *Beowulf*; the sea-monster—in earlier versions a turtle—is *fácnes craeftig*,

‘skilled of deceit’, as his counterpart is *fácne bifongen* in line 2009 of the epic. This helmet-wearing leviathan takes the deceived with him to a watery hell at the sea-bottom where Grendel also had her lair. As Michael Alexander observes, ‘Anglo-Saxon has a metaphoric density to which no modern translation can do justice’.<sup>74</sup> One of Wilbur’s trial pieces is, perhaps, worth looking at to see if this is true. Old English is as different from present-day English as is modern German or, rather, Friesian, yet the tantalizing affinities seduce a translator:

<p><i>Fyrst forð gewat; flota wæs on yðum, bát under beorge. Beornas gearwe on stefn stigon— stréamas wundon, sund wið sande; secgas bæron on bearm nacan beorthe frætwe, guð-searo geatolíc; guman út scufon, weras on wil-sið wudu bundenne. Gewat þa ofer wæg holm, winde gefýsed flota fámi-heals, fugle gelícost, oðæt ymb án-tíd óþres dógores wunden-stefna gewaden hæfde ðæt ðá líðende land gesawon, brim-clifu blícan, beorgas stéape, síde sæ næssas; Þá wæs sund liden, éo-letes æt ende.</i></p>	<p><i>A space of time went on; the ship was on the waves, the boat under the headland. The warriors eagerly on the prow mounted— currents churned, swimming against the sand; swordsmen bore into the bosom of the ship bright-wrought war-trappings splendid; the men shoved off, warriors on a willing venture the well-jointed ship. It went then over the billowy sea, wind-spel, the foamy-necked floater, a fowl most like, till at about the same time on the next day the winding-carved prow had advanced, so far that the seafarers land saw, sea-cliffs shimmering, high headlands, broad sea-bluffs; then were the narrows navigated, of the sea-voyage an end.</i></p>
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As can be seen, a word-for-word literal translation (by the author of this paper), even when striving for alliteration, is a hit-or-miss affair; the rhythm sent awry by the now long-distorted relationship of English with its remote ancestor. Wilbur’s rendering, on the other hand, adheres to the four-stress pattern of the original and to the prohibition on alliteration in the last stress:

Then the time came when the boat was on the tide  
the ship under the shore-cliffs. Sailors eagerly  
flocked to the forecave. Folded in combers,  
sand rolled in seawater. Stowing below  
in the bowels of the ship their blazoned armour  
and well-made weapons, the warriors shoved out  
their hardy vessel on the hoped-for journey.  
It went then over the wave-ways, the wind behind it,  
the foamy-necked floater, fleet as a sea-gull,  
until at the same time of the second day’s travel  
the curved-prow craft sighted the mainland,  
sea-cliffs shining, steep elevations,

74. Alexander, M., *The Earliest English Poems*, London, Penguin, 1991, xxi.  
high wide headlands; then was the haven found,  
the ocean-passage over. . . .

*The Whale and Other Uncollected Translations*, p.13.

But the effort is a poorly rewarding one. The lack of connectives, quite normal in Old English, lent the poetry its distinctive pattern of accumulated images. By contrast, the

insistence of modern English syntactical connectors somehow flattens the visual contours of the word-snapshot hemistichs. Even with clever lexical licence, and from the hands of a master such as Wilbur, some of the heart-beat drama of the original escapes us. Wilbur was wise enough to see this, and desist; declining the mantle once bestowed by Auden on Tolkien, of ‘bard to Anglo-Saxon’.

In opting instead for modern recreations of the form, preserving the stresses and the alliteration; allusively praising good craftsmanship in “Junk” and the enduring inlay of the ‘good grain’, again, in “Driftwood”; and conjuring the wintry bleakness of the heathen unknowing in “Lilacs”, Wilbur has not sought to emulate or outdo Pound, but to make new the ancient form that epitomised, to borrow Michael Alexander’s phrase, ‘composition with and through form rather than simply in it’ [ibid., xx]. Howard Nemerov, Wilbur’s exact publishing contemporary and immediate successor as Poet Laureate of the United States, has twice pondered the moral of the disposable society, in “The Town Dump” (1958) and “Waste” (1987-91). In the first of these, the dump is ‘the city / Which seconds ours’. It is too, a ‘dreamy midden’ where ‘purifying fires’ do their work, as they do with Wilbur’s “Junk”. Similarly, there are ‘objects of value or virtue’ to be picked up there. In the later poem, there is a Germanic echo in the first line: ‘The glittering mound of flattened cars’—the discarded body-armour of the modern age. The fires, too are modern:

The cracking plants, the candles of desire  
That lead us on to unconsidered ends—

Nemerov is dealing with the culture of waste; his scavengers are ‘acquainted with the art / Of our necessities’. Wilbur is arguing for true craftsmanship as a prerequisite for art. As if in proof of this, his success with a remote literary form, as with the Anglo-Saxon, presages his successful translations from syllabic French to accentual English couplets, showing that borrowed form, whether from another culture or from another time, which *is* another culture, need not be a vitrine for the display of dead specimens, but can itself vitrify and anneal into new crystal.

The perception of sound, the root of all words, and its effect upon the ear and upon our moods is fittingly the matter treated in the first poem appearing in Wilbur’s first collection. Silence, against which sound must be heard, is established here by means of a ‘running-down record, ground round / to full quiet’. The cicada, whose mentioned long incubation may serve as a metaphor for patient abjuration of song by day, is himself a metaphor for the celebration of sound for its own sake—he is deaf. Sound, then, is another of God’s, or nature’s gifts, to be celebrated and used for joy and understanding. The treatment is light.

The matter scarcely impinges on the everyday consciousness. This poet chooses to draw our attention to it. A scientific paper might do so also. In between, one suspects, is territory the poet cedes to mere reportage. A different, war-poetry interpretation of “Cicadas” is offered by Longenbach: that the poet sings, as the cicada sings, deaf to the cannon’s roar [op.cit., p.73]. The poem’s publication date supports this, though not necessarily to the exclusion of Wilbur’s more usual deep-ramifying speculations.

In the second poem, “Water Walker” [NCP 338-341], lying amid a ten-stanza metaphor for life between the elements of air and water, four lines invert the ordinary process of perception:

I saw the houses sleep  
And the autos beside them sleeping,  
/  
Lawnsprays and tricycles waited for the sun,  
Shyly things said what they meant:

Lines may be lifted *trouvé*-fashion, like this, from the poems and be found to encapsulate complete ideas. The perceiver presumes to say, ordinarily, what things mean. In the Berkeleian absence of beholders, they are free to fit into another order of things, to associate with the night-shadows of nature. A mere poetic conceit to set off a train of thought? At what point is meaning separable from the things which supply the sensory perceptions that ultimately make up meaning? How much of our self-perception is constructed out of things about us? The poem at large attracts and baulks critics with its incongruous mix of regional and biblical imagery. The poet may be saying many things obscurely, but where he says one thing clearly, that need not be relegated until the entire ‘double-croctic’ is deciphered—as he tells us in *Responses* [31].

From the next poem: “Tywater” [NCP 342], a ‘mock dirge’ [Edgecombe, 14], yet as touching an elegy as any for a common soldier:

And what to say of him, God knows.  
Such violence. And such repose.

But the tribute to the man, to the dignity of each man’s achievement in life, is made of two imagist wreaths:

...the lariat’s butterfly  
/  
...cuts of sky would roll within  
The noose-hole

The other elegies: “For Dudley” and for the unknown friend of “The Mill”, have none of the skipping *abba* tetrameter rhyme of “Tywater”. Elegies for thinking men, they are, in fact;

elegiac urns on which the ever-present question is engraved: what makes reality for the mind?

Yet in the mind as in  
The shut closet  
Where his coats hang in black procession,  
There is a covert muster.

[NCP 136]

This vividly visual compound metaphor, framed as a simile, has a conspiratorial chill to it and, for the occasion, is shudderingly apt. The rumbling metaphor of the mill [NCP 276] for the mills of the mind, survives cliché through another metaphor, again of vivid originality:

Time all alone and talking to himself  
In his eternal rattle.

The incorrigibly metaphoric English language seems to gain in imagist force when applied in haiku form, which eschews both metaphor and metaphor-suggesting rhyme. A the single chilling image makes “First Snow in Alsace” [NCP 347] a memorable poem:

You think: beyond the town a mile  
Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes  
Of soldiers dead a little while.

‘Imagist precision’ M.L. Rosenthal calls this [Salinger, p.34]. Syllabically, it is not haiku. There is rhyme, and time and proximity are linked in *mile* and *while*. But it is haiku in design: no metaphor—just the evocations of the image. The sightless eye-sockets make one start back. But it is *little* that sends a shudder down the spine. Moments ago they were like us, alive. Johnathan N. Barron’s full Frostian reading of the poem sees the images presented to us as perceived by contrasting Romantic and demotic languages.<sup>75</sup> But it is clear that Wilbur is being relentlessly imagist in stanza after stanza to make a point: perception creates its own reality, a fantasized, desired reality, even where ‘fear-gutted trustless’ (booby-trapped?) reality is immanent.

Of Haiku, Wilbur has remarked that ‘it seems to me that the haiku is the only syllabic form in which the Anglo-American ear can hear quantity with some assurance’. Describing the evolution of “Thyme Flowering Among Rocks” [NCP 142] in his contribution to David Lehman’s (1987) *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, he explains that, crouching amid his herb-garden, the stems, racemes and tiny leaves of the thyme plant, seen in close-up,

75. Barron, J.N., “Robert Frost and a new Tradition”. Wilcox, 1994, ELS Monograph Series, Univ. of Victoria, BC., p.20.

brought Japanese miniature gardens to mind and this in turn suggested the haiku form. He uses it, in his ‘little experiment’ to get ‘a quantitative structure of which the reader is aware, playing against a speech rhythm which carries the emotion and emotion’ [Lehman, 1996,

p.231]. The Haiku, though originally a ‘starting verse’ in the Japanese, is not here used for its now primary function of image-concentration. It sustains the focus-in-miniature, nonetheless. In the end, however, it, too, is made to utter the Wilbur mantra:

...The world’s  
A dream, Basho said,  
Not because that dream’s  
A falsehood, but because it’s  
Truer than it seems.

Wilbur returns to the Haiku stanzaic form in a late poem: “Alatus” [NCP 7]. Here, it sustains a flashing military metaphor, of blade and pennon, gold and gore, flame and fire—all in the falling glory of a New England Autumn—and all leading, fluttering away, to the same airy question:

...every  
Naked stem, lifting  
Beyond the faint sun,  
Toward the hid pulse of things, ...  
[NCP 8]

No “old chaos of the Sun”, as in Stevens, here. Belief in the renewal of life is stoutly affirmed, with an echo of Bunyan:

This time’s true valour  
Is a rash consent to change,  
To crumbling pallor,  
Dust, and dark re-merge.  
[NCP 7]

Bold rhyme and the metaphoric work of transferred epithets are hotly combined in this envelope cinquain from “June Light” [NCP 356]:

Then your love looked as simple and entire  
As that picked pear you tossed me, and your face  
As legible as pearskin’s fleck and trace,  
Which promise always wine, by mottled fire  
More fatal fleshed than ever human grace.

A well-forged love poem, using an unconventional *abbab* organization in a stanzaic form itself without conventional form in the English language [cf. Fussell, 139], it seems robust enough to resist demands for address to some Passaic angst illustrated and lit by Edward Hopper. The somewhat arch appearance of defiant conventionality in this early poem does suggest what it was that irked his critics. His craft has never been doubted. It was the sheer perfection of it that invited attack.

Fellow formalists James Dickey, Anthony Hecht, William Meredith, James Merrill and Howard Nemerov are all close contemporaries of Richard Wilbur; all have served in the military—Dickey, Meredith and Nemerov were aviators—and all continued to work within

the formalist tradition (if somewhat erratically so in the case of Dickey). Nemerov published his last collection in 1991, the year of his death; Hecht published a collection in 1997, and Wilbur's latest collection appeared in 2000. Both Hecht and Nemerov returned in their poetry to the scenes of their WWII service in the European theatre, Hecht in *The Hard Hours* (1967) and Nemerov, wryly, in *War Stories* (1987). Notably, Hecht had sought at first in his earlier poetry to 'exclude or gracefully overpower' the disorder and pain of what he witnessed and learned of in the war [Myers and Wojahn, 214]. Wilbur, too, has written:

My first poems were written in answer to the inner and outer disorders  
of the Second World War [*Responses* 118]

and has acknowledged the effect that this had on his early poetry:

I think that they may at moments have taken refuge from events in language itself  
—in wordplay, in the coinage of new words, in a certain preciousness [ibid.].

After asserting that the language of his later poems has become plainer and more straightforward, he reveals the mould from which his poetry was first cast:

Another change in my work has been a partial shift from the ironic meditative lyric  
toward the dramatic poem' [ibid.].

Mattfield points out that that lyric form is still present in the watershed *Walking to Sleep* collection of 1969, notable for its two long blank-verse poems and for the intensified narrative of other long poems [op.cit., p.21]. Wilbur has cogently and emphatically argued its currency:

Most American poets of my generation were taught to admire the English Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and such contemporary masters as John Crowe Ransom. We were led by our teachers and by critics whom we read to feel that the most adequate and convincing poetry is that which accommodates mixed feelings, clashing ideas, and incongruous images. Poetry could not be honest, we thought, unless it began by acknowledging the full discordancy of modern life and consciousness. I still believe that to be a true view of poetry [*Responses*118-].

He is also fully aware of its pitfalls:

The virtue of the ironic meditative poem is that the poet speaks out of his whole nature, acknowledging the contradictions that inhere in life. The limitation of such a poem is that the atmosphere of contradiction can stifle passion and conduce to a bland evasiveness [ibid.,121-2].

Adherence to form is what best points up that very discordancy between modern life and consciousness. Wilbur's eclectic use of forms is what prevents the atmosphere of contradiction from becoming stale. In both Hecht and Nemerov the personal voice, in its

singular and collective persons, is more directly heard than in Wilbur, more anecdotally so. There are, apart from that, many coincidences of theme and rhyme. These are worthy of attention, in that such, rather than common allegiance to metric and stanzaic form, are revealing of the profoundly reflective impulse that global warfare imparted to the GI poets. All have a metaphysical bent. Only the language of their metaphysics differs. Wilbur's October Maples, whose leaves 'never so unfallen as today', dazzle with a Pentecostal light and trigger thoughts of the Paraclete, and the Hellenically-derived tale of Mary's mantle. It is not their 'fluttering fans of light' that make Nemerov's sidewalk Ginkgo's remarkable [*Trying Conclusions*, 73], but their anthropomorphically coordinated fall, as if by stellar command. Both conceits are dazzling. Nemerov's is apocalyptic; Wilbur's more Stevensian in its playfulness. Nemerov's "Blue Suburban" [TC 11], set in 'the elegy country', is uncannily reminiscent of Wilbur's "Leaving" [NCP 15]. In the latter, the institutional, academic setting compels restraint and induces attendant self awareness. The 'industrious ruin' that Nemerov foresees for the drunken friend, in the plural, is a bitter pun uttered with the pathos of elegy. The Wilbur poem, among his *New Poems* (1987) in NCP, is still typically economical with the personal and anecdotal, while being for all that perhaps the more powerfully suggestive. It would seem, from another coincidence, almost as if Nemerov were rehearsing Wilbur's poetic exercises:

Thus helplessly the mind in its brain  
 Weaves up relation's spindrift web,  
 Seeing the swallows' tails as nibs  
 Dipped in invisible ink, writing . . .  
*The Blue Swallows* [TC 34-5]

The 'drunken fingerprint' of Wilbur's "Event" [NCP 274] is clearly to be seen here. Nemerov's poem addresses the function of poetry, Wilbur's the process of thought. Both poets are on the same ledge of cognition; Wilbur, perhaps, maintaining the deeper focus. Curious, too, that Nemerov should wait forty years to publish more war poems. These make their appearance in *War Stories* (1987), are and no less poignant and pithy for being so late. There is none of the 'tough-tender metaphysical bromide' that Clive James dismissed in Wilbur's war poems [cf. Salinger]. The point is that these are *war* poems; Wilbur's are Wilbur poems, written in wartime.

The shaped stanzas of Anthony Hecht's "The Gardens of the Villa D'Este" invite immediate comparison with those of Wilbur's "Castles and Distances". The rippling shapes of Hecht's baroque piece run on for seventeen eight-line stanzas, with stanzas four to eight making a veritable 'baroque fountain' like Wilbur's own, only with bawdy and

fleshly allusions appropriate to the voluptuous statuary. There is no statuary to be seen in the Wilbur poem, but the undulations of the shaped landscape speak to other, more sweeping questions, of power and privilege, patronage and the pastoral. Hecht admits that Dylan Thomas's "Vision and Prayer" and Herbert's "Aaron" may have been the subconscious models for his stanza form, but says his "Gardens" and his "La Condition Botanique" were occasioned by his wish to write 'free-flowing essay poems, and a stanza that expands in the middle provides a kind of leeway for improvisation and digression'[Hoy, 43]. Hecht's poem may labour under an 'excess of detail', a feature of his work which Hoy says Auden complained of [op.cit., 37] but that detail sharpens the focus in the "The Gardens of the Villa D'Este" and offers this clear contrast:

This is none  
Of your French topiary, geometric works,  
Based on God's rational, wrist-watch universe; ...  
[*Collected Earlier Poems*, p.94]

For thus it was designed:  
Controlled disorder at the heart  
Of everything, the paradox, the old  
Oxymoronic itch to set the formal strictures  
Within a natural context, where the tension lectures  
Us on our mortal state, and by controlled  
Disorder, labors to keep art  
From being too refined.

[*Collected Earlier Poems*, p.95]

The latter whole stanza may be read as comment on the virtues of formal poetry, the poem itself a validation of sensuous perception, or of perceptive sensuousness:

Actually, it is real  
The way the world is real: ...  
[*Collected Earlier Poems*, p.94]

Each poem announces itself; Hecht's: 'This is Italian'; Wilbur's: 'From the blackhearted water... from a gunmetal bay'. Wilbur's poem meditates on the merits of meditation:

Some cast their crowns away  
And went to live in the distance. ...  
/  
... The dread expense  
Of golden times they dreamed  
Was that their kingdoms fell  
The deeper into tyranny, ...  
[NCP 291]

Hecht's poem is, in places, more like Wilbur than Wilbur. His Gardens of the Villa D'Este are

A plot to capture alive the migrant, tourist soul  
In its corporeal home with all the deft control

And artifice of an Hephaestus' net.

[stanza IV]

Again, as with Nemerov, there is a striking coincidence of subject choice between the Hecht, the early Hecht, and Wilbur. One more example is illustrative: Hecht's meditation on a 'clumsy snapshot of an infantry platoon' gives leave, in "Dichtung und Wahrheit", to celebrate the animating powers of the word, as opposed to 'The chisel and the lens', who merely 'Deal in a taxidermy / Of our arrested flights'. Wilbur, musing on a Mathew Brady civil war photograph, hopes similarly 'by some fervent fraud' to 'Father the waiting past'. He proposes to do so, moreover, in a 'live formality'. Again, there is in the Hecht poem a personal stake: his wartime platoon in 'Poetry and Truth'; a loved one, Susan, in the 'Villa D'este'. Wilbur's soldiers are as remote from him as from us, his castles and distances at a remove also, 'Carved at Amboise in a high relief'. Both Hecht and Wilbur mine and polish words. One must objectively allow that the denial of a greater presence of an engaged persona with Wilbur, other than with Hecht, and Nemerov, where it adds immediacy to the thought, focuses attention on the thought. To take another example, where the Wilbur and Hecht persona both report as witnesses of a natural phenomenon: Wilbur on the October maples of Portland; Hecht on the same trees in mid-July, in Rochester. Wilbur's poem, as already noted here, makes compressed word-play on pentecostal fire and on a leech'd tincture of thought. Hecht's more expansive stanzas are luxuriantly imagist and also unmistakably Dickinsonian, replete with the distinctive dash:

The cast of mercury vapour everywhere—  
Some shadowless, unfocussed light  
In which all things come into their own right,

The rain, of course, will come

/

But for the moment the whole world is real

"The Lull" *Collected Earlier Poems*, p.179.

Wilbur's blue gaze on the other hand is more than merely ethereal; it is more nearly Cartesian. One other coincidence of subject material—one will not say *matter*, between Hecht and Wilbur is that of the Hecht's first-collection poem "A Hill" and Wilbur's uncollected "Italy: Maine", first published in 1944 in the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post*. The Hecht poem contains at its centre a Berkeleian moment:

And then I heard  
What seemed the crack of a rifle. A hunter, I guessed;  
At least I was not alone. But just after that  
Came the soft and papery crash  
Of a great branch somewhere unseen falling to earth.

*Collected Earlier Poems*, p.2.

The eerie chill of the sudden, unaccountable detachment is all the more effective for the close-up detail with which both the sensed and imagined scenes in the poem press themselves on the consciousness. Both poems imagine a hill in New England from the distance of Italy; Wilbur's, written while on active service, is fittingly pugnacious and tenacious, concluding with an uphill charge:

Whose song is for swarm and surfeit, let him win  
This passive land, moist-green and sun-stunned.  
I'll go after  
Spike grass, crab apple, gargoyle tamarack  
And the last crazy jack pine climbing Cadillac's  
back.

[reprinted in *WLA*, Spring-Summer 1998, p.23]

Hecht would go on to incorporate in his poetry the topical, his own life experiences; and to articulate the protest of Judaism against the Holocaust, Wilbur would insert a distance; touching only briefly and tangentially on the personal and on the topical hardly at all, except in his few explicitly political poems. *Landscape only*, carries the symbolic message from "Italy: Maine" (the wartime *Post* editors, much to Wilbur's annoyance, gave the poem an "Italy" dateline and altered the first line to begin 'In Italy,').<sup>76</sup> The choice of a sparer use of material is thus evident from the outset. Hecht confronts a confused richness and presses a vintage, disregarding the lees. What has seemed in Wilbur fastidiousness is already proclaimed here; he is not after 'swarm and surfeit'. In 1985, seeing himself as having

become 'garrulous', he excused himself: 'I usually have a sense of distance from my material'.<sup>77</sup> The forward-area cryptographer was not then concerned only with making pastoral comparisons. The poem praises the trees of Maine: the crab apple, the tamarack larch, and the pine, who:

Make their stand among stones, and having  
drawn up rock  
Into their arms, would rather be beaten than  
bend.

[*WLA*, *ibid.*]

After the third line, in fact, no more is heard of Italy until it is dismissed in the last stanza; dismissed, in a passage that has echoes of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for a landscape in the mind:

Growing, they twist at the wind, but finally lock

76. *War Literature and the Arts (WLA)*, 1998 Spring-Summer, 10.1, p.22.

77. Butts, p.183.

Into the sky, and stand to creation's end,  
Faces to sea wind.

Jewett speaks of the ‘great army of pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing as if they waited to embark. ...the trees seemed to march seaward’ [Anchor/Doubleday edition, p.33]. As Longenbach points out, it in this poem that Wilbur’s ‘devotion to the unmasterable and apparently insignificant details of the natural world, lovingly catalogued’ sounds a note which will be ‘richly harmonized’ throughout his later poems [op.cit., p.71]. His catalogue here reads:

Even Maine’s luxuries  
Have the look of things earned: rock pools, spray-  
whittled an age,  
Fine reindeer lichen—sprawling wood-beds of  
It—trees  
Woven with old-man’s beard since the Deluge,  
And blueberries, little and firm, with misted skins,  
Tasting of sun and stone and hard-got water.

There is a local colourist here, but one intent on the question of man’s justification of the cosmic accident of himself. Releasing the poem again, to *WLA* in 1998, the poet admitted that it shows the influence of Hopkins’ ‘hypermetrical and rugged lines’. It belongs among his war poems, and yet does not. It is a pledge to some future struggle.

Writing under a sub-title *Precedents for the New Formalism*, Wyatt Prunty sites the genesis of that present-day movement in the precise moment when Wilbur and his peers appeared on the publishing scene

In the presence of increased scepticism following the war, the resource needed for poetry’s future was contained in language. A poem that appeared relatively traditional drew its energy not from formal devices so much as from tropes, where language provided the imaginative free play of similitude. ...Form plays a role, but it is a secondary role. [op.cit., p.208]

Seeing the delayed-reaction of the 1960s free-verse movement as an aberration, Prunty singles out Ammons and Creeley as chief offenders in ‘syntactical disruption’ perpetrated by their over-reliance on line-breaks and enjambment. Prunty calls for order by drawing a distinction between ‘poetry that generates meaning synchronically, with imagery, and poetry that operates diachronically, with rhetoric’ [ibid., 66]. The wry outlook bequeathed to Hecht, Nemerov and Wilbur by their WWII experiences ensured that they, at least, would be wary of over-reliance on transmitted images on the one hand, or on anything recollected in tranquillity on the other. With regard to imagery, Wilbur has indeed said ‘There must be areas of statement’. Wilbur uses wit, quietly; Nemerov, according to Prunty, decided to ‘sometimes use wit but at other times, humour, with informal diction, even slang, played against formal poetic structures’ [ibid., 164]. That humour and demotic

diction can obscure the otherwise closely similar preoccupations of Nemerov and Wilbur: with seeing, with the clash of the world of experience with the world of thought. Nemerov phrases it succinctly

Once I saw world and thought exactly meet,  
But only in a picture by Magritte.

*The Human Condition* [CP 354-5]

The fault lines between world and thought are what continued to occupy Nemerov and Wilbur, Hecht and Hollander too. None of them found it necessary to change course or to renounce earlier work. Not so Adrienne Rich, who came to feel that her early poetic style, having been formed by those poets she had read as an undergraduate: Frost, Dylan Thomas; Donne, Auden, MacNeice, Stevens, and Yeats—was craft only [cf. Gelpi, 1975, pp.94]. ‘But poems are like dreams,’ she added, ‘in them you put what you don’t know you know’ [ibid.]. Evidently, Rich felt that something in her womanhood needed to be expressed that was ‘too sharp for speech’, as in “Mathilde in Normandy” [cf. “Private Eye, Public Voice”]. That such a poignant poem and eloquent protest at domestic confinement should stand among a body of work that Rich has distanced herself from asks its own question: if form could so hauntingly phrase an inexpressible question, what can express utterance add to it? Tapestry is both motif of and trope for confinement: the snags of worry that conveyed the women’s part, endure; the fearless tigers stitched by Aunt Jennifer have a liberty she had not; the exotic animals of deferred promise in “The Prospect”; fascination of an ordered world, however unreal, however in reality unlike its silken image in “Design in Living Colours”. Helen Vendler’s comment on them is by extension that same post-modernist pigeon-holing of the well-made poem:

The early poems were so neat in their useful skeins of imagery; if a colour appeared in the upper left of the tapestry, it was sure to reappear, economically but predictably, in the lower right

[Gelpi., op.cit., pp.166].

Reviewing *The Will to Change*, the latest collection that Rich herself allowed to be included in her *Collected Early Poems*, Robert Boyers saw disintegration: ‘I don’t know that we may hope for very much from her verse beyond striking fragments’ [Gelpi, pp.160]. In breaking her own mould, Rich opted for the ideolectic personal voice, the voice of the new American orthodoxy. Wilbur, still standing out in Jarrell’s rainstorm, claims a no less personal voice while relying on a New Critical lightning conductor. He makes no reference to tapestries. Threaded ‘objects’ typically lack perspective and focus; the medium is too much part of the message. Nemerov, in his direct and deceptively literal way, has no such compunctions

On this side of the tapestry  
There sits the bearded king,  
And round about him stand  
His lords and ladies in a ring,  
His hunting dogs are there,  
And armed men at command.

On that side of the tapestry  
The formal court is gone,  
The kingdom is unknown;  
Nothing but thread to see,  
Knotted and rooted thread  
Spelling a world unsaid.

*The Tapestry* [TC 48]

Here is the same New Critical delight in the appearance of mute ambiguity, in the possibility of subversive encodings in the needlework, as in ‘Mathilde’; whether witting or unwitting, it is immaterial.

Disliking the term “formal verse” [Butts, 76] and claiming, in 1970, to ‘simply write a kind of free verse that ends by rhyming much of the time’ [ibid., 74], Wilbur does not disdain traditional techniques, feeling quite comfortable with them: ‘They are not simply a straitjacket, they can also liberate you from whatever narrow track your own mind is running on’ [Butts, 92]. As one who rejected the ‘cranky emotional dryness’ of Pound [Butts, 35] and who refused to defect to the Williamsite camp he is, in the view of one critic, merely one of the “New Rear Guard” who in the late forties put up a resistance to modernism itself and to postmodern innovations.<sup>78</sup> Wilbur, indeed, claims to *be* a modernist:

As regards technique, a critic has called me one of the “New Formalists,” and I will accept the label provided it be understood that to try to revive the force of rhyme and other formal devices, by reconciling them with the experimental gains of the past several decades, is itself sufficiently experimental.

This response is quoted by Hill (op.cit., pp.20) and by Breslin (1984, pp.25) who found it in

Kunitz (1955). Those first “New Formalists” were Wilbur, Lowell, Merrill and Viereck, according to Breslin, whose response to *it* deserves to be quoted in full as an example of enduring anti-Wilbur prejudice:

Here Wilbur is so sensible, balanced, has such “complexity of attitude” on the question of form that he is left with no ground to stand on. He affirms the revival of traditional forms

but, of course, he does not want to repudiate the moderns so he tips his hat in the direction of experimentalism, which he then deftly redefines as—traditionalism.

His statement dramatically reveals how poets of Wilbur's low-profile generation tried to counter strength with skill, energy with expertise.<sup>79</sup>

Reading Wilbur's account of modernism from *Responses*, "On My Own Work", as a 'reconception' denying modernism's wider, extra-literary forces—a harsh reading of Wilbur's modest 'as in the other arts'—Breslin reacts as to an outrage:

Wilbur actually questions modernism at its core. ...his revisionist account of modernism, which may strike us at first as an all-too minimal shift, actually causes a tremor along the

foundations which shatters the entire modernist enterprise.<sup>80</sup>

Breslin has not yet been proved wrong in his skepticism about a poststructuralist revival of Wilbur [ibid., pp.35-36], yet, by his sheer longevity and by virtue of his fidelity to metre and his predilection for rhyme, Wilbur is the arch symbol of formalist poetry and a living bridge to the New Formalist poetry of the 1980s and '90s. "New Formalist" with capitalization implies a critical category, and is defined in Keith Maillard's survey of the formalist revival as 'used most often to refer to poets writing in meter'.<sup>81</sup> So capitalized, it should perhaps be further defined as a North American and Anglo-Saxon term since, as applied to French poetry, it is understood very differently. Wherever the Anglo-Saxon accentual tradition is

felt, a statement such as the following must sound superfluous:

Poets in the 1980s agree that a poem is not determined by fixed divisions (stanzas or paragraphs) or by the rigid adoption of given metric and rhyme schemas.<sup>82</sup>

One might add that poets in every decade of the twentieth century, after the first, have refused *rigid* adoption of given metric and rhyme schemas. Richard Wilbur, for one, repeatedly rejects 'exercises' in form. We know that Wilbur is emphatically not in sympathy with the typographical experiments of Charles Olson: 'I reject as preposterous Charles

Olson's ideas about the relation of the typewriter to poetic form' [Butts, 179]. We may assume that Wilbur, a noted translator from the syllabic French, would equally not be in sympathy with these further pronouncements from Virginia A. La Charité, the source hereabove quoted, on French neo-formalism:

78. Breslin, 1984, cited in Michelson, 1991, pp.228 (note).

79. Breslin, James E.B., *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp.25

80. Breslin., op.cit., p.36.

81. Maillard, K., "The New Formalism and the Return of Prosody", *Antigonish Review*, 1995, Winter, vol.100, pp.164.

82. La Charité, Virginia, A., "The Poetics of Neo-Formalism" in *Literary Generations: A Festschrift in Honour of Edward D. Sullivan*, Lexington, Ky., Toumayain, A. (ed.), 1992, pp.221.

Where traditional poetry relied on meter to create poetic memory, poetry in the 1980s relies on a line of poetry which intervenes in white paginal space. [Neo-formalists]. . .consider the line of poetry as the syntactical element of unity. ...grant complete power of textual arbitration to the reader, who follows the rules set out by the directional lines signs, the lines of the verse.<sup>83</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Wilbur has confessed that the foreign poets who most interested him were chiefly French, and to having a particular taste for Francis Ponge, a poet of whom Wilbur says 'He's even more of a "thing poet" than Dr. Williams or Marianne Moore, and he's more *prosaic*, I should say, than either of them is' [Butts, 15].

This is no throwaway comment, as may be seen from the following:

The French Poet Francis Ponge has put his gift of speech at the service of the rain, the blackberry, the shrimp, the pinegrove, the fire, in a kind of witty but heartfelt subservience to the external which no American poetry has yet come to [*Responses*, 218].

His claim for Ponge is a challenge to which, implicitly, Wilbur has felt himself bounden (Wilbur had translated several of Ponge's monologues—published in his 1982 *Whale*—as early as 1950). La Charité, projecting from the verse theory of Mallarmé, proceeds to elucidate that the concern of the French neo-formalists is to 'grasp what culturally makes a poem poetic' and that, consequently, their concern (though seeming to imply that they may not know it) is with rhythm, particularly that of the alexandrine line which 'identifies French verse from that of other cultures and languages'. The argument makes a leap at this point.

Examination of rhythm is held to lead to an investigation of the 'peculiarities of the French language' which in turn leads to the following:

The reader crosses and crisscrosses the paginal space of the poem, drawing upon the lexical, semantic, and syntactical clusters which intellectually indicate a poem from among the verse forms. The reader's memory makes tactile and oral associations, emotionally deleting poetic form in the spaces between and around the imposing black print.<sup>84</sup>

These extracts suggest that neo-formalism, at least in the French case, is, in fact, a form of neo-Modernism.

The parameters of the debate in North America appear to be narrower. Maillard counts it as a virtue of the New Formalists that they do not have a shared aesthetic, much less a shared theory. He notes that Dana Gioia, widely known as an apologist for the new

83. La Charité, *ibid.*, pp.223,222.

84. La Charité, *ibid.*, pp.229.

formalism, writes as much free verse as metrical and ‘appears more comfortable in free verse’. Gioia, also, has urged a rediscovery of the epic or book-length poem. Others; Corn, Logan, McClatchy, write for an implied reader who is ‘erudite as they’. Maillard sees them ‘in their complex syntax, elevated diction, and love for elaborate conceits’ as directly linked to the high formalism of the 1950s [op.cit., pp.167]. Nor does the influential anthology, *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, champion formal verse over free.<sup>85</sup> New formalist poetry has been attacked, and intemperately so. Its very lack of an aesthetic credo has led its attackers to supply one, usually that of elevating form over content. If Vern Rutsala could say that in the fifties ‘it was the tight lyric, usually about private or ahistorical themes, or nothing’.<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Holden pronounces on New Formalism that it ‘retrieved the genteel stand of ironic, fixed-form, Late Modernist poetry which had reigned in the forties and fifties, a strand epitomized, perhaps, by the vintage work of Richard Wilbur’. The ‘tight lyric’ is epitomized by Wilbur’s poetry, though his themes, as argued in this paper, are only superficially ahistoric and very seldom merely private. One might ponder how the work of the same poet, so assuredly situated among Late Modernists by this one critic, could be seen by another, Breslin, to “question Modernism at its core”. Acknowledging the younger poets working in a formalist vein: Peacock, Logan, Moffett, Schnackenberg, Holden is nonetheless of the opinion that New Formalism as practiced by its more successful adherents such as Brad Leithauser and Vikram Seth produced ‘elegant bottles without genies in them’ [Myers and Wojahn, 267-8].

Maillard (1995) already sees in the new triumph of formalism a degeneration into versifying.

The positive principles of free verse await codification, if that is not a contradiction in terms, which Maillard urges, nonetheless. Wilbur, who admits ‘I’m not much interested in critical theory’ [Butts, 39], and who acknowledges Yvor Winters’ efforts at codification, still concludes ‘I don’t think really there are any rules for writing free verse’ [Butts, 27].

Whether there may be rules for *interpreting* free verse is what the theorizing of La Charité is about.

The negation of traditional forms and the resistance to any form, may be a misconception of the principles of the free-verse movement, if one accepts Charles Hartman's 1980 contention that "using free verse does not simply mean discarding metrical principles but substituting new ones". Breslin cites this as a "sagging of the literary battle lines" [pp.253]. Indeed, Maillard urges a reuniting of poetry about the centre of a

85. Maillard, K., *ibid.*, pp.164-8.

86. Rutsala, V., "Déjà Vu: Thoughts on the Fifties and Eighties",  
*The American Poetry Review*, Sep./Oct.1989, p.29.

continuum:

If we are coming from the direction of metered verse, we approach the middle  
by allowing an increasing number of foot substitutions and variations in line-length,  
if from the direction of free verse, by allowing an increasing number of metrical phrases  
[op.cit., pp.177]

Metred poetry, in the hands of a master like Richard Wilbur, will never degenerate into mere versifying. Semi-metrical poetry, practiced by the schooled and naïve alike, is epochal in the hands of a Pound or an Eliot; less so otherwise. Deploring the confrontational stance of both free-verse and new-formalist proponents, Maillard urges for North American poets a return to what Wilbur has spent his life teaching: the serious study of prosody. 'To try to write poetry / Using what Wyatt and Surrey left around' as John Ashbery muses in "Grand Galop" [*SP*, 185]. Wilbur does not regard those Petrarchan trial-pieces simply as outmoded and discarded moulds or as pre-labelled bottles to be filled with any old rot-gut, as Williams described them. For Ashbery, Holden allows that High-Theoretical Criticism—reader-response theory and Derridean theory, is appropriate since most of his poems cannot be explicated by traditional, New Critical techniques.<sup>87</sup> Breslin, citing the common critical assumption that in contemporary or postmodern poetry metonymic procedures replace metaphoric ones, concludes that a work that was purely metonymic would be an endless list and that, therefore, metaphor covertly returns when critics look for links within poems. Quoting Paul de Man to the effect that the continuous appeal of modernity engenders repetition, and Robert Pinsky to the effect that pursuit of immediacy often generates verbal mannerisms, Breslin argues by analogy from E.H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (with particular reference to the poetry of Charles Olson, to whose theories Wilbur has applied the word "preposterous") that with all poetry, as with the visual arts, schemata are inescapable [op.cit., pp.68, 75, 253].

‘In or about the year 1976’, Jonathan Holden might have written, but resisted the temptation, saying instead that this year marked the beginning of a large outpouring of excellent practical criticism *much like the outpouring which accompanied the advent of Modernism in 1913*. Deep Image was attacked (by Paul Breslin), Free Verse critically defended (by Stanley Plumley). A shift in fashion, which Plumley noted, admitted once again and even encouraged a greater diversity of modes, including the narrative. Holden, reviewing two decades, declared that the drift in American poetry had been in a

87. Myers and Wojahn, eds., *A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry*.

Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, p.270.

conservative direction with its “realist” component as its main and central strand.<sup>88</sup>

Wilbur’s old antagonist Robert Bly is editor of *The Best American Poetry 1999*, and chooses as the keynote of his introduction a commendation of the “heat” in current American poetry. Among examples he singles out is Richard Wilbur’s “heat of form”:

...a heat that comes from making demands on language in such a way that the language fits into a prechosen form. ...Richard Wilbur, like Frost, uses his strength to bend language, ...In writing so, he remains faithful to the sting of the late 1940s and the pentameter line, which was a part of the flavour of those days.

Still, perhaps, a somewhat backhanded tribute. Wilbur is in the anthology with another who emerged from the same mould, Adrienne Rich. So too is Elizabeth Bishop—by virtue of a poem from among her notebooks and papers, which, it emerges, was first published in 1998. The other contributors include a roll-call of the surviving canonical figures of American poetry from the preceding decades. Realism and narrative are, as Holden divined, strongly re-emergent, even, one might think at first sight, in the poetry of Richard Wilbur. Narrative, by the way, is fascinatingly represented by Donald Hall’s “Smile”, which reads like a John O’Hara short story. Wilbur’s comment on his own contribution, “This Pleasing Anxious Being”, is informative:

I think that people resist as long as they can a full sense of the world’s change and of their own ageing. At last, when a certain number of irreplaceable people are gone, and the home place has been razed, and one is the only rememberer of certain things, the gut acknowledges what the mind has always thought it knew. That is the source of this poem, which moves both back and forward in time, and considers time in a number of perspectives.

The title, Wilbur adds, is taken from the twenty-second stanza of Gray’s ‘Elegy’.

We learn in the same note that a new book of Wilbur poems, *A Wall in the Woods*, is

forthcoming. The present poem of fifty four lines of free verse, in three sections, is indeed a more relaxed Wilbur, testing the truth of his own late maxim; the trademark wordplay used sparingly and lightly. A reworking of “Looking into History” [NCP 252] which was also in three sections, though of quatrains, it is personal and family history this time. Again a

reflection on past scenes captured in photography, the poem is more directly a testing of the William James view of time, “the practically cognized present. ...from which we look in two directions into time’ (Breslin, pp.70, quotes this in his painstaking effort to find, with particular reference to Olson, a theoretical platform for ‘the poetics of immediacy’).

Family faces in the dinner-table photograph ‘drink the candlelight’ and ‘ghosts of gesture’

88. Myers and Wojahn, *ibid.*, pp.258-61.

produce a ‘muffled clash of silverware’. The scene shifts to a beach picnic where the wicker picnic hamper then in style will ‘convict them of mortality’—the Wilbur parents, that is. The Wilbur brothers ‘do not plead with time’, having no reason yet to fear it, while, to one side, Wilbur père is trying on canvas to fix an instant in time. All very Wilburesque, to a point. In the third section the eleven-year-old Wilbur ‘might foresee’ the landing craft which would bear him to the southern coast of France in 1944, and the bedstead from which—it might be construed as either—his parents would depart with their world from him, or he himself would perceived the world ‘flicker and be gone’. The tone is unmistakably that of Gray. Lives, mute or eloquent, write their own text. The modest quietude becomes the toned-down Wilbur style, competent as ever, no word wasted. Only a poet satisfied with his reputation, perhaps, if he troubled to write at all, would write like this. The awaited collection, which has since appeared with the title *Mayflies*, would appear to confirm this supposition. The title poem quickly escapes its Frostian woodland setting to become another Wilbur speculation, with echoes if the early “Cicadas” [NCP 337], on the purpose of the purposefulness evident in all creation, on what de Chardin called The Phenomenon

of Man. It cannot be a coincidence that Fabre and Lamarck figure in the palaeontology of de Chardin and the poetry of Wilbur. It is the title poem, perhaps, for its concluding valedictory note:

Unless, I thought, I had been called to be  
Not fly or star  
But one whose task is joyfully to see  
How fair the fiats of the caller are.

Seven of the twenty eight items in the collection are translations, and reference is made to twelve magazines and to four book-length publications in which some of the work has

previously appeared. Charlotte Ward Wilbur is the object of another love poem, as she was in “A Simile for Her Smile” [NCP 333] and “Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning” [NCP 236]. Entitled simply “For C”, it is an elegy for the passing of youthful love and survives, by its playful pointing of contrast, such Wilbur rareties as a ‘darkling clubhouse lawn’ above

which ‘bright Perseids’ flash and crumble, as well as a ‘wild sostenuto of the heart’, a rose window, and the firmanent. This anti-simile opens:

After the clash of elevator gates  
And the long sinking, ...

and calls to mind those navigation-bridge gates that balked the hasty traffic of the poet’s mind and made such abrupt ease, all in consequence of a smile or the hope of one from that same “C”, in “Simile”. This is very early and very late Wilbur.

One other part-structured poem appears, the title that “Mayflies” replaced: “A Wall in the Woods: Cummington”. This poem was critiqued by Bruce Michelson for *Christianity and Literature* in 1993. A self-announced ‘woods’ poem, the dialogue with Frost is thoroughly gone into by Michelson, who stresses Wilbur’s celebration of good workmanship where Frost had mused on futility. The shift in tone and structure in the second part of the poem causes it, as Michelson says, to ‘leap and scamper like the chipmunk it is ostensibly about’, after the ‘rampart-like’ first section. The wall now has an inner life in its lively denizen. Michelson would have the poem take Wilbur to within ‘one indefinite step short of nowhere’. Yet the meaning is plain enough; Wilbur sings:

Of the brave art of forage  
And the good of a few nuts  
In burrow-storage;

of agility, ‘Lost as it is in being / Briskly adaptive’; of the metaphysical plenum; ‘And of how we are enlarged / By what estranges’. A veritable *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. If it is hunter’s fare, there is no help for it. Wilbur had said, in 1964:

What I must not do, I am sure, is to attempt a manner which might satisfy my critics;  
there is nothing to do, in art, but to persevere hopefully in one’s peculiarities.<sup>89</sup>

89. Ostroff, A., (ed.) *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964, p.20.

CONCLUSION:

It is the burden of this paper that this one poet, who has for over fifty years 'persevered in his peculiarities', has demonstrated that tradition and the individual talent are not yoked together, but dance, rather, ever capable of inventing new patterns of meaning. Moreover, that tradition is no barrier to contemporaneity of expression. If Richard Wilbur has not broken moulds in the manner of Pound and Williams, neither has his work brought poetry to a terminus. This was a talent which subordinated itself in restraint to the craft of poetry. In its very restraint lay the force of its expression.

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