

338

"PERFECTION IN A FINITE TASK"

"PERFECTION IN A FINITE TASK":
THEME AND FORM IN
REPRESENTATIVE POEMS OF RICHARD WILBUR

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ABSTRACT

While there has been much helpful commentary on Richard Wilbur's work, inadequate attention has been given to the individual words and phrases which are vital to the entirety of each poem. Critics tend either to propose very specific but limited views of Wilbur's intentions and techniques or to give somewhat sketchy analyses of the individual poems. In this thesis, I have attempted to deal with the bulk and variety of Wilbur's poetic output, especially points of interest and difficulty which critics overlook or tend to skim past.

The five themes discussed in this thesis are related to Wilbur's idea of happiness. A happy poet does justice to the world he perceives. The "world" that Wilbur is concerned with includes the "Republic of Letters," the world of phenomena, and the world of human experiences. An artist continues and modifies his literary tradition and tries to shape the protean diversity of human consciousness. True "happiness" can only be gained through self-exposure to life's endless contradictions and through maintaining a balance between the artist's conflicting responses to these contradictions.

One of the many contradictions is the conflict between human vision and the multifarious world. Wilbur attempts to show that physical vision is allied to moral vision. The poet also tries to articulate a compromise between the scientific and the artistic modes of perception. Through vision, man may achieve a reciprocal relationship with the world. A poet's vision is to discover the cosmic harmony beneath the apparently fragmented world and, as in a kaleidoscope, to arrange a design which holds the disparate images together.

Wilbur's mundane commitments counterbalance his spiritual yearnings. His remarks about Robert Frost's Apple-picker--who "has climbed not to heaven but toward it, seeking perfection in a finite task"--provide the key to the understanding of Wilbur's work in general. Corresponding to the rival claims of spirituality and corporeality, the structure of poems on this topic--and many of Wilbur's poems--is dialectical. The arrangement of the arguments is usually a juxtaposition of the thesis against the antithesis, followed by a synthesis. This dialectical format of ideas can be divided into three categories: polarities and counterpoint, dialogues, and narratives of dilemma.

Another rivalry is that between art and reality. Naked reality motivates the artist to metaphor, and he

gives reality form and pattern. The difficulty of this relation arises from the intricacy involved in achieving a "borrowing of the powers" from the real objects. Sometimes Wilbur translates the fugitive events into verbal patterns and sometimes he reshapes other artists' interpretations of life into another art form--a poem.

The qualities that Wilbur cherishes in poetry--grace and lightness, for instance--are qualities essential to a purposeful existence. He is concerned with the tension between the limitations imposed upon man and man's aspirations and achievements within or despite these limitations. Wilbur's Weltanschauung is this-worldly: it seeks out ways of living happily in a fallen world. While Wilbur is genuinely saddened by mortality and mutability, he does not seem to be imaginatively held by them. The reader does not suspect the poet's honesty and seriousness in his exaltation of personal equilibrium and his faith in a basically decent universe. But the reader may sometimes miss a sense of human tragedy. Wilbur's limitations are his temperamental peculiarities which he can hardly be expected to transcend consistently. Given his register, Wilbur is brilliant. By and large, he imagines excellence and is uncommonly successful in his attempt to "make it."

FOREWORD

In a recent New Yorker, Auden praises Housman warmly, yet considers him a minor poet because he did not develop--because the late work is scarcely distinguishable from the early. I should not know how to apply that criterion to George Herbert, because he did so much of his work within a period of three years; and I hesitate also to apply it to Robinson: his work did change, but since by and large it changed for the worse, the fact of change does not seem to enhance his case.

--Richard Wilbur, "Poetry's Debt to Poetry"

I have considered very carefully two possible approaches to Richard Wilbur's poetic output: chronological or thematic. I attempted the chronological approach first, but felt dissatisfied with it because of the absence of significant changes, philosophical or aesthetic, in Wilbur's poetic career. Although he is at times more dramatic and less impersonal in his later poems, for example, in "The Mind-Reader," "The Writer," "Running," and "Walking to Sleep," he consistently speaks through an ironic, meditative voice. The recurrence throughout his work of certain concerns--for example, the relation between human vision and the kaleidoscopic world, between imagination and reality, between art and life--makes a

thematic approach more viable.

Consequently, in the present thesis I have attempted to survey Wilbur's poetry in terms of its various thematic elements. I have devoted each of my five chapters to one such element. The five themes are related to Wilbur's idea of happiness which, as he points out, can be defined as "vital participation." A happy poet does justice to the world which he perceives and in which he lives. In the introduction, I have tried to place Wilbur in the context of his contemporaries. I have devoted a special section to Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, two poets who--though strictly speaking not Wilbur's contemporaries--have had a profound influence on his development as a poet. However, it is not my intention to compare him with the numerous poets whose works he might have read or with whom he is closely associated. Wilbur's reading has been unusually wide, both in English literature and in several others as well. Therefore, a study of the influence on him would be too extensive a subject for a thesis. Each of the five chapters, following the introduction, opens with introductory remarks which relate to the theme of the chapter. Against the backdrop of these introductory remarks, I have regularly tried to illustrate the theme through the discussion of selected poems. Since my discussion

must remain tentative, I have closed my thesis with an epilogue instead of a conclusion.

I have selected for discussion poems that seem to me particularly good or important or representative. Each poem of Wilbur's, as he himself points out, is "autonomous." Yet inadequate attention has been given to the individual words and phrases which are vital to the entirety of each poem. While there has been much helpful criticism of Wilbur's work, the bulk of it has been either in brief reviews or essays, or in monographs which attempt to present very specific accounts of Wilbur's intentions and techniques. For example, John Field's interesting thesis focuses almost exclusively on Wilbur's search for order, while Carl Adkins' thesis traces Wilbur's move towards informality. Inevitably, their views of Wilbur's poetic corpus are limited. Donald Hill's book on Wilbur is a very useful introduction to his first four volumes of poetry; but Hill's analyses of individual poems tend to be somewhat sketchy.

This study is intended to deal with the bulk and variety of Wilbur's poetic output, especially points of interest and difficulty which critics overlook or tend to skim past. The result of such an effort may not appear as tidy as a critical piece that proposes a very specific view of a limited aspect of the work, but

I hope that it can represent the response of a careful reader who comes to the work of this major figure without preconceptions or theories to prove.

There are a number of good poems which, for one reason or another, I have omitted from my detailed treatment. For example, "The Mind-Reader," which deals with the mentality and consciousness of a psychic, does not quite fit my area of critical concern. In general, however, I believe that the comments I have made throughout this thesis would be readily applicable to those works of Richard Wilbur which, for reason of space and time, I have been unable to examine closely.

A NOTE ON REFERENCES

References to the poetry of Richard Wilbur are incorporated into the text; other notes are at the end of each chapter. Titles of volumes of verse by Wilbur have been abbreviated as follows:

<u>The Beautiful Changes</u>	<u>B.C.</u>
<u>Ceremony</u>	<u>C.</u>
<u>Things of This World</u>	<u>T.T.W.</u>
<u>Advice to a Prophet</u>	<u>A.P.</u>
<u>Walking to Sleep</u>	<u>W.S.</u>
<u>The Mind-Reader</u>	<u>M.R.</u>

The appropriate abbreviation and page numbers are inserted in parentheses immediately following the title of the poem to which I have referred. Complete bibliographical information for all these titles, and other works cited, is given in the list of works consulted.

During the preparation of this thesis, I have been in touch with Richard Wilbur, who, very kindly, agreed to answer a number of my queries. His answers are footnoted in the thesis, and are referred to as: Wilbur's letter to Wai.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Magbool Aziz, who introduced Richard Wilbur to me and continued to offer me excellent advice throughout the preparation of this thesis. Professor Alwyn Berland, Dean of Humanities, took time from many busy schedules to read the manuscript. His original insights and constructive criticism were very much needed. Professor Richard Morton, Chairman of the Department of English, and Professor Michael Ross discussed Wilbur's poems with me and carefully commented upon and improved the various drafts. Very kindly, Professor Ross made a number of helpful editorial suggestions on the final version of this study.

I am indebted to McMaster University which, in November 1979, provided me with a travel grant to interview Richard Wilbur in Northampton, Massachusetts and to visit the Robert Frost Memorial Library in Amherst, Massachusetts, where most of Wilbur's manuscripts are located.

Special thanks must be given to Richard Wilbur, who granted me an interview with him and later edited the transcription of it. He has corresponded regularly with

me and always answered my queries promptly. His kind words and letters are greatly appreciated.

I would like to thank Dr. Paul Walton and the staff of the Department of Fine Arts who showed me slides of the paintings to which Richard Wilbur might have alluded in his poems. Without the expertise of Dr. Spiro Panagiotou of the Department of Philosophy and Dr. George Paul of the Department of Classics, I might not have been able to locate the exact passages from Plato's and Homer's works which have intrigued Wilbur.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
FOREWORD	vi
A NOTE ON REFERENCES	x
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
INTRODUCTION: RICHARD WILBUR AND HIS MILIEU	1
CHAPTER	
I "THE PUBLISHED POET IN HIS HAPPINESS"	23
II HUMAN VISION AND THE KALEIDOSCOPIC WORLD	62
III THE CORPOREAL AND THE SPIRITUAL	97
IV ART AND REALITY	137
V MORAL FORTITUDE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION	169
EPILOGUE	211
APPENDIX: A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD WILBUR	214
WORKS CONSULTED	236

INTRODUCTION

RICHARD WILBUR AND HIS MILIEU

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; this is a partial and provisional attempt to establish relations between things."

. . . In general, I would say that limitation makes for power: the strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle.

--Richard Wilbur, "The Genie in the Bottle"

In contemporary American poetry, there has been a rivalry between the "academics" who stand for new formalism and the "beats" who rebel against traditional forms.¹ This poetic war, as Walter Sutton observes, originates in the controversy of two factions in the modernist movement:

It is possible to see two strongly contrasting strains in the modernist movement, each with its own adherents, or "party." In keeping with the spirit of Imagism, one group has insisted upon complete freedom of individual expression through the development of experimental free verse poems. Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore (an experimentalist if not an entirely "free" verse poet), and some of the early Imagists constitute what might be called the radical wing, or the party of free

experimentation. The most intransigent individualists among modern poets stand here. The other, more conservative party, preferring traditional themes and measures, embraces Frost (whom Pound was unable to win over to free verse), the later Eliot and Eliot's many followers, including the Southern "Fugitive" poets.²

Robert Lowell borrowed two terms from Lévi-Strauss--

"cooked" and "raw"--to comment on this literary conflict when he received the National Book Award in 1960:

Our modern American poetry has a snarl on its hands. Something earth-shaking was started about fifty years ago by the generation of Eliot, Frost and William Carlos Williams. We have had a run of poetry as inspired, and perhaps as important and sadly brief as that of Baudelaire and his successors, or that of the dying Roman Republic and early Empire. Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvellously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal.³

Such discriminations between "academics" and "beats" recall Philip Rahv's distinction between two continuing factions in American literature: the "Palefaces" (e.g. Poe and James), and the "Redskins" (e.g. Melville and Twain).⁴

Such a polarity is evident in two rival anthologies: Contemporary American Poetry edited by Donald Hall and The New American Poetry: 1945-1960 edited by Donald Allen. The poets that Donald

Hall selected are "academics"--Richard Wilbur and Robert Lowell, for example--who incline towards learning and formalism. The "academics" often write in rhyme and meter and try to adopt and reshape the techniques discovered and practised by the more conservative wing of the modernist movement. They share T. S. Eliot's belief in tradition, and they employ a poetic manner in some ways similar to that of the English metaphysical poets of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. The "academics" are either writers-in-residence or university teachers, who are published by university presses, or by reputable commercial magazines, and are approved by the New Critics. Richard Wilbur, for example, has taught at Harvard, Wellesley, Wesleyan, and at present is writer-in-residence at Smith College.

Donald Allen, instead, anthologized the "beat" poets; for example, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, Bohemians in their style of life and followers of Pound and William Carlos Williams in their free-verse experimentation. They tend to write from personal and sometimes "far-out" experiences, and they freely use American colloquialisms.

The poetic war has resulted in numerous poems and prose pieces attacking the opposing camp or defending their position. In "Fresh Air," a satirical poem on the "academics," Kenneth Koch writes:

Where are young poets in America, they are trembling
 in publishing houses and universities,
 Above all they are trembling in universities, they
 are bathing the library steps with their spit,
 They are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems
 about maple trees and their children,
 Sometimes they brave a subject like the Villa d'Este
 or a lighthouse in Rhode Island,
 Oh what worms they are! they wish to perfect their
 form.⁵

Wilbur, who believes in formal grace, refuses to
 "associate free verse with daring and formal poetry with
 timidity."⁶ He maintains:

Mostly, I haven't been able to please myself in
 my efforts to write free verse. I agree with
 Ezra Pound when he says that free verse is harder
 to write than formal verse. It's very clear
 that however much one masters the formal elements
 in a formal poem, however much one makes them do
 just what one wants, they are a little bit of a
 crutch and a comfort. They may not end by looking
 so. I hope to heaven they don't look so in my poems.
 But at any rate, they feel so during the process
 of composition. You say to yourself, "Well,
 there's another pentameter; I'm right at home."
 But with free verse, you have to have a kind of
 intuitive assurance that what you've done is
 right. In spite of Yvor Winters' efforts at
 codification, I don't really think that there are
 any rules for writing free verse, or that one
 can say why a free verse poem is successful. I
 have a feeling that the best free verse is likely
 to be written by people who have mastered formal
 verse. I think that there I am agreeing with Pound
 and Eliot. Nevertheless, I think that the writing of
 formal verse is likely to delay one's progress
 towards the writing of free verse; because, however
 difficult it may be, formal verse is in some ways
 emotionally comfortable. It requires fewer arbitrary
 decisions, fewer intuitive conclusions that one is
 somehow mysteriously right.⁷

Wilbur also points out:

the ideal free verse writer would be perhaps even

more slowed down by the demands of his organic kind of form, by his need to feel that he has achieved perfection in that sort of form, than the formal poet is by his kind of formal restraint. But, in general, I think free verse doesn't work that way. The free-verse poet inclines to write⁸ faster, inclines not to choose his words so carefully.

And in reply to William Carlos Williams' speech on structural reforms,⁹ Wilbur argues:

As Miss Bogan remarked in the case of Baudelaire, when poets put new wine in old bottles, the bottles become new, too. This, I suppose, is my main objection to Dr. Williams's talk; he lays all the stress on structural reforms and inventions, as if structure were a practically separable thing, instead of talking about the need of a perpetual revolution of the entire sensibility, in the incessant task of achieving relations to the always changing face of reality. To this latter purpose I have seen sonnets, villanelles, inversions, and all that Dr. Williams reprehends do great services in the last few years, and when this is so, one cannot say that the poets have surrendered to traditional forms. They have taken them over, rather.¹⁰

Donald Hall, in his essay "The Battle of the Bards," ascribes this controversy between the "academics" and the "beat" poets to "a ritual as old as America: East and West, the salon against the frontier, sophistication against ruggedness, learning against experience, the literary life against the life of the bum."¹¹ Yet any attempt to distinguish one camp from the other is at best tentative and at worse unjust. Hall aptly comments:

Sometimes it seems that the West is a place created for Easterners to go wild in. The Beat Generation is a group of New Yorkers who came to light in San Francisco in the late fifties. Columbia College is the alma mater of Jack Kerouac, novelist of

On the Road, and Allen Ginsberg, whose most famous poem is "Howl." I think that the cosmopolitan intellectualism of Columbia is exactly the fuel which powered their drive across the continent; they looked for an opposite irrational enthusiasm on the opposite coast. And the attack on the Beat Generation comes from the place they left.¹²

Hall calls for a synthesis of "all virtues of all schools." "Perhaps the greatest example to remember," he concludes, "is that of Ezra Pound, who had the sensitivity to recognize the genius, not only of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, but of Robert Frost."¹³

In the camp of the so-called "academics," there is an "internal" war. Some of them, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, and Karl Shapiro, for example, have abandoned rigid in favor of free structures. Some have rebelled against the poetics of their mentors, T. S. Eliot and the New Critics. Delmore Schwartz wrote on "The Literary Dictatorship of T.S. Eliot," while Karl Shapiro assumed an anti-intellectual and anti-Eliot position in a collection of articles appropriately titled In Defence of Ignorance. Wilbur cites the following passage from Shapiro's "The Farmer and the Poet" to show the fallacy of his argument:

the only poetry that is recognized is the poetry that repeats the past, that is referential. It relates back to books, to other poetry, to names in the encyclopaedia. It is the poetry of the history-inhibited mind only, and as such it is meaningless to people who lack the training to read it. The Little Magazine, the avant-gardist, the culture academician base the esthetic

experience on education. [sic] Whereas poetry needs not education or culture but the open perceptions of the healthy human organism.¹⁴

Wilbur contradicts Shapiro's assumptions:

Mr. Shapiro and I agree that a poem which refers to Romulus and Remus and the wolf will be meaningless, in part at least, to those who lack the training to read it. I disagree, however, with Mr. Shapiro's determination to hound that wolf out of poetry, to abolish the literary and historical past, to confine us to the modern city and declare the ruins off limits. It would not be worth it to make poetry more generally usable at the cost of abridging the poet's consciousness.¹⁵

Although most the "academics" are professors, their profession does not impose any consensus on them.¹⁶ Donald Hall in his anthology chooses Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur as the two representative post-war American poets. According to Hall, Lowell's Lord Weary's Castle and Wilbur's The Beautiful Changes

were culminations of the twin strains of density and delicacy. Robert Lowell's Lord Weary's Castle is a monument of the line of tough rhetoricians; beyond this it was impossible to go. (The failure of John Berryman's Homage to Mistress Bradstreet, as I see it, only proves my point.) The effect of tremendous power under tremendous pressure was a result of a constricted subject matter and a tense line, in which the strict decasyllable was counterbalanced by eccentric caesura and violent enjambement. In contrast was Richard Wilbur's The Beautiful Changes, which was the peak of skilful elegance. Here was the ability to shape an analogy, to perceive and develop comparisons, to display etymological wit, and to pun six ways at once. It appealed to the mind because it was intelligent, and to the sense of form because it was intricate and shapely. It did not appeal to the passions and it did not pretend to. These two poets, though they are not

the oldest here, form the real beginning of post-war American poetry because they are the culmination of past poetries.¹⁷

By and large, Hall's comparisons of the two poets are persuasive and convincing. His comments on Wilbur, though somewhat oversimplified as all general statements are, seem just. And Wilbur's style has not changed significantly since The Beautiful Changes.¹⁸ On the other hand, Hall's comments on Lowell, though applicable to Lord Weary's Castle, seem to have ignored Lowell's new style in Life Studies.

Donald Hall's preferences and evaluations were challenged by another rival anthology which was published also in 1962: The New Poetry selected and edited by A. Alvarez. Alvarez chose Lowell and John Berryman, instead of Lowell and Wilbur, as the two leading American poets of the period. Alvarez's remarks in the introduction to his anthology imply that he is dissatisfied with urbanity and impersonality, two major characteristics of Wilbur's poetry. Lowell and Berryman, Alvarez observes, are "no longer adherents of the cult of rigid impersonality,"¹⁹ but are in tune with contemporary anxiety. War and brutality have been common phenomena throughout history, but they were magnified to a massive scale in the two world wars and in the Nazis' death factories. And the world is constantly threatened by the outbreak of a nuclear

war. Alvarez maintains:

the forceable [sic] recognition of a mass evil outside us has developed precisely parallel with psychoanalysis; that is, with our recognition of the ways in which the same forces are at work within us. One of the therapeutic purposes, for example, of Bruno Bettelheim's [sic] secret psychoanalytic observations when he was in Dachau and Buchenwald was to educate himself into realizing how much of what went on around him expressed what went on inside himself. Another analyst has suggested that the guilt which seems to dog the refugees who escaped from Germany may in part be due to the fact that the Nazis fulfilled the deepest and most primitive drives of the refugees themselves, killing fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children.²⁰

Lowell, Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, for example, tend to experiment with psychoanalysis in their poetry. Plath seems to share the pain of the refugees from Germany and at the same time to feel guilty for the brutality that the Nazis inflicted upon their victims. Both Berryman and Plath often see themselves as tormentors and victims simultaneously in a community of pain and torture. In his dream songs, Berryman identifies himself with Buddha, who is burned, with the red-haired whore who is "screwed," with the "coon" who survives, and Speck, the Texas Sniper Whitman, and Loeb, who are criminals and murderers. He stays awake at night, worrying if he has murdered any of the people he knows. And Sylvia Plath rises from the ashes to "eat men like air." Even Lowell can see his reflection in Murder Incorporated's czar Lepke, though, as Wilbur points out, Lowell would be the last person to

celebrate such a character.²¹ With reference to the horror and chaos of the modern world, Alvarez insists that poetry should "drop the pretence . . . that gentility, decency and all the other social totems will eventually muddle through" and that the poet should be able and willing "to face the full range of his experience with his full intelligence."²² Wilbur, who tends to avoid deeply personal and painful subjects, does not seem to meet the criterion set forth by Alvarez. Lowell and Berryman, on the other hand,

were able to write poetry of immense skill and intelligence which coped openly with the quick of their experience, experience sometimes on the edge of disintegration and breakdown.²³

The symposium on "Skunk Hour,"²⁴ which involves Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, and John Berryman, shows the differences between Wilbur and his two contemporaries. Berryman stresses the madness and despondency of the narrator of "Skunk Hour":

Our occasion is the approach of a crisis of mental disorder for the "I" of the poem--presumably one leading to hospitalization, or hospitalizations, spoken of elsewhere in the volume, Life Studies, where it stands last. . . .

The skunk is an outcast; this is the basis of the metaphor, and how a mental patient feels. . . . The skunk, its little weakness or weapon apart, is charming; cheer up. But nobody likes; paranoia.²⁵

In spite of the bleak landscape of the poem, Wilbur notices a positive sign:

To the poet, as he "breathes the rich air" on the back stoop, they stand for stubborn, unabashed livingness, and for his own refusal (in the teeth of society and of his own jangled nature) to cease desiring a world of vitality, freedom, and love.²⁶

Wilbur's comments express his own commitment to life, whereas Berryman's observations reflect his affinity with Lowell. Both Wilbur and Berryman are right; but they respond to different sides of Lowell. Wilbur insists that it is love that calls us to the people and things of this world; but Berryman identifies himself with the world through pain. "Dream Song 242" depicts a tearful woman confessing to the poet in his office; and at the end of the Song, the poet says: "I am her." Both Lowell and Berryman seem to write from an intense experience of their suffering, whereas Wilbur tends to meditate on violence and pain, instead, only if and when these happen to be the subject matter of his poems, as they are for example, in "On the Marginal Way" (W.S., pp. 5-8).

Robert Lowell's response to Wilbur's and Berryman's commentary on "Skunk Hour" sums up the three-way relation among these three major poets of our period:

Sometimes he [Wilbur] and I are named as belonging to the same school, what Time Magazine calls "the couth poets." Sometimes we are set in battle against one another. I have no idea which, if either, is true. Certainly, we both in different ways owe much to the teaching and practice of John Crowe Ransom. Certainly, his essay embodies and enhances my poem. With Berryman too, I go on a strange journey! Thank

God, we both come out clinging to spars, enough
floating matter to save us, though faithless.²⁷

Any approach to Wilbur must, of course, take into account the sources of his attitudes towards life and poetry. While Wilbur is a wide reader of American and European poetry--and, as a teacher, is indeed academically qualified in the formal study of literature--the strongest immediate influences on him are, no doubt, the work of Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost. In their choice of landscape, Frost is domestic, whereas Stevens and Wilbur are more cosmopolitan. The setting for Frost's early poems, as Richard Poirier observes, "is the intervalles of the White Mountains and the countryside around Derry in southern New Hampshire; for the later ones, the Taconic Mountains around Shaftesbury and the Green Mountains around Ripton in central Vermont."²⁸ The geography of Stevens' poems stretches from New England to Florida and to Yucatan. The landscape of Wilbur's ranges from the snow in Alsace; to the olive trees in Grasse, France; to the naked bathers by a Spanish shore; to the fountains in Rome; to a terrace in St. Thomas, the West Indies; to Wellfleet, a resort town on Cape Cod; and to meadows in New England.

With Frost, Wilbur shares a sense of humility before the things of the world. In "An Event," for

example, Wilbur feels helpless and delighted at the elusiveness of reality which refuses his artistic ordering. Besides, both Wilbur and Frost hesitate to let their vision stray away from direct contact with reality. Their love for the world always counterbalances their spiritual aspirations. Wilbur observes:

"After Apple Picking," the monologue of a farmer dizzy with fatigue, is at its most general a poem about the strain and imbalance that attend an obsessed perfectionism in any high undertaking. The apple-picker is not to be judged a fool I think: he has climbed not to heaven but toward it, seeking perfection in a finite task, and he has come down from his ladder with real apples. Furthermore, as the poem says, he is superior to such creatures as the woodchuck, who are never troubled by the aftereffects of aspiration. It is "human" to do (or overdo) as he has done, and the poem is only incidentally cautionary.²⁹

Wilbur himself, as I will show in subsequent chapters, recommends a similar balance of the "Opposing impulses toward 'earth' and 'heaven,'" ³⁰

Wilbur, however, differs from Frost in the presentation of his arguments. Whereas Frost writes more often in the narrative mode, Wilbur tends to use a dialectical format. Wilbur usually places a thesis and a counter-thesis against each other and ends the poem with a synthesis of the foregoing arguments, or with a poetic resolution. Sometimes Wilbur juxtaposes two opposing entities against each other without giving a resolution or a synthesis, as for example, in "Two Voices in a

Meadow," "The Aspen and the Stream," and "La Rose des Vents." Some of Wilbur's later poetry is anecdotal and less impersonal, for example, "Walking to Sleep" and "Cottage Street, 1953," yet contrasts and sets of contrasts are always present, projecting a debate within the poet.

Wilbur's debates on art are seldom separated from his preoccupation with life. The qualities desired for art are the same qualities recommended for a purposeful way of living. To have an adventurous spirit and to keep in contact with reality are as important to an artist as they are to anyone who desires a meaningful existence, as Wilbur suggests, in "Walking to Sleep" and "Objects," for example. For Wilbur, the suicidal Sylvia Plath, who rejects life, at her best can produce only "brilliant negatives" ("Cottage Street, 1953," M.R., p. 19).

With Stevens, Wilbur agrees on the transforming power of imagination. Both poets try to shape the protean diversity of human consciousness of a kaleidoscopic world. The rival claims of imagination and reality constitute one of the major themes in both poets' works, for example Stevens' "The World as Meditation," "The Comedian as the Letter C," and "Anecdote of the Jar," and Wilbur's "Ceremony," "An Event," and "The Beacon." Art orders slovenly reality, but it is the delicate balance between art and reality that an artist attempts to achieve.

Yet Wilbur parts company with Stevens at the point where Stevens deifies imagination. In "The Man With the Blue Guitar," Stevens maintains that poetry or

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns . . .³¹

Imagination creates and restores the world, according to Stevens. In "Sunday Morning," he remarks of the woman:

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.³²

But, although both poets stress the importance of cultivating sensory and emotional responses to reality, Wilbur does not share Stevens' exaltation of the divinity of human emotion or intellect. "God is in me," Stevens maintains, "or else is not at all (does not exist)."³³ In "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," he says:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself . . .³⁴

Stark reality is blankness or nothingness in Stevens' "The Snow Man," and chaos in his "The Idea of Order at Key West." If the perceiver does not add himself to barren reality or sees "Nothing that is not there," then all he sees is "the nothing that is."³⁵ And the only possible form of order is that which imagination imposes on chaos. Wilbur, on the other hand, humbles himself before the

Creation. When asked about his concept of the power of imagination, Wilbur replied:

The poet is not really a rival creator, I think, in the sense that he can make a new thing; but he can fuse the things that are, and combine them with thoughts and feelings, and make them stick, and thus create worlds of imagination and thought into which other people can enter. I think Coleridge simply says that imagination is the reverberation in the finite mind of the original fiat, and reverberation is a nice word. It suggests something much diminished from the original creative power of God, much less than that.³⁶

Wilbur himself maintains that he admires Stevens but differs from him:

I find Stevens a bit stark when he limits the possibility of happiness to a making of attunements between the isolate self and the physical world; his diffidence about human love and community is an impoverishment; his certainly of God's non-existence is an unfortunate reaction from his own early piety; his mistrust of all tradition and continuity means that poetry as he conceives it can't perform the social functions which he sometimes assigns to it.³⁷

Yet Frost, Wilbur, and Stevens do share an affinity which is pointed out by Wilbur himself:

One does not think of Wallace Stevens, who so stressed the transforming power of imagination, as having much in common with Frost, and yet Stevens would agree that the best and happiest dreams of the poet are those that involve no denial of the fact. In his poem "Crude Foyer," Stevens acknowledges that poets are tempted to turn inward and conceive an interior paradise; but that is a false happiness; we can only, he says, be "content, / At last, there, when it turns out to be here." We cannot be content, we cannot enjoy poetic happiness, until the inner paradise is brought to terms with the world before us, and our vision fuses with the view from the window.³⁸

As for style, there are differences and similarities between Frost, Stevens, and Wilbur. In 1940, Frost and Stevens met in Key West and engaged in repartee. Stevens said, "Your trouble Robert, is that you write poems about--things." To this remark, Frost replied, "Your trouble, Wallace, is that you write poems about--bric a brac."³⁹ The styles of both Wilbur and Stevens are more embellished than that of Frost, especially with regard to the use of literary allusions. Both Wilbur and Stevens are explicitly intricate, whereas Frost is deceptively simple. Yet, as Wilbur points out, in Frost's "Hyla Brook" for example, one can find parenthetical acknowledgement of Tennyson, Milton, and Theocritus:

Because of his colloquialism and his rustic settings, Frost has often been thought of as a non-literary poet. That is a serious error. Frost was lovingly acquainted with poetic literature all the way back to Theocritus, and he was a conscious continuator and modifier of the tradition.⁴⁰

The difference between Wilbur and Stevens in their use of bric-à-brac is well summed up in Joseph Riddel's comparison of Stevens' Parts of a World with Wilbur's Things of This World:

As a book, Parts of a World has a forbidding singleness of tone, of a world without variety and hence life. A reader coming upon the equally precise artistry and richer diversity of Richard Wilbur's Things of This World may well ask why Wilbur's poems seem to be so much of the world he lives in, while Stevens' seem more the world of the art gallery. His answer, I think, would be that Stevens' "world" is a gallery, of the mind--that by "a world"

Stevens implied an idea of wholeness, of order, toward which the act of imagination directed itself.⁴¹

Stevens himself, in "Explanation," states that his role as a poet is to decorate desolate reality with embellishments:

Ach, Mutter,
This old, black dress,
I have been embroidering
French flowers on it.⁴²

The "French flowers" refers to the French diction with which he is in love. Stevens told René Taupin about the influence of the French Symbolists on his work: "La légèreté, la grâce, le son et la couleur du français ont eu sur moi une influence indéniable et une influence précieuse."⁴³

Wilbur knows French literature well, both as a reader and a translator; his concern for elegance of expression leaves no doubt that he would agree with Stevens on the "lightness" and "grace" of French verse. To these two virtues, Wilbur has dedicated two poems in The Beautiful Changes. Yet "lightness" and "grace" refer not only to the style of writing, but also to the style of living that he believes in. The legerity of the "birdsnest" and Aunt Virginia in "Lightness" triumphs over death. And Edna Ward in "Cottage Street, 1953," who has led a life of "grace and courage," is framed as a work of art by Wilbur.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹George Garrett, "Against the Grain, Poets Writing Today", in Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., American Poetry, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 7 (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), p. 227.

²Walter Sutton, "Criticism and Poetry", in Irvin Ehrenpreis, ed., American Poetry, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, 7 (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), p. 180.

³Program of the Boston Arts Festival (June 1960), 13. Quoted in H. B. Staples, Robert Lowell, The First Twenty Years (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 13.

⁴Philip Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin", in his Image and Idea (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions Books, 1949), pp. 1-5.

⁵Kenneth Koch, Thank You and Other Poems (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1962), p. 55.

⁶"Richard Wilbur: An Interview", ed. Robert Frank and Stephen Mitchell, Amherst Literary Magazine, X (Summer 1964), 65.

⁷Ibid., pp. 64-65.

⁸Ibid., p. 65.

⁹William Carlos Williams, "Experimental and Formal Verse: Some Hints Towards the Enjoyment of Modern Verse", Quarterly Review of Literature, VIII, No. 3 (1954), 171-175.

¹⁰Richard Wilbur, "The Bottles Become New, Too", in his Responses, Prose Pieces: 1953-1976. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 223. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as Responses. The article "The Bottles Become New, Too" "was written, on the invitation of Theodore Weiss, in reaction to addresses by Lousie Bogan and William Carlos Williams, and was ultimately published, together with their speeches, in the Quarterly Review of Literature" (Responses, p. 215).

¹¹Donald Hall, "The Battle of the Bards", Horizon, IV (September 1961), 116.

¹²Ibid., p. 116.

¹³Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁴Cited in Richard Wilbur, "Round About a Poem of Housman's", in Responses, p. 29. "The Farmer and the Poet" was a letter from Shapiro to Reed Whittemore: Shapiro defended his In Defence of Ignorance, which was published in Poetry, XCVIII (1961), 170-185. The passage cited by Wilbur appears on p. 182. The article "Round About a Poem of Housman's," according to Wilbur, was a lecture "given during a poetry festival at Johns Hopkins University in October, 1961, and was published, together with other festival lectures, in The Moment of Poetry, edited by D. C. Allen, in 1962" (Responses, p. 16).

¹⁵"Round About a Poem of Housman's", Responses, p. 29. Wilbur can sympathize with Shapiro because Wilbur recognizes an existing problem in America: the illiteracy of the mass. In the same essay, he writes: "Any poet would feel justified in referring to Romulus and Remus and the Wolf--one could hardly find a classical allusion more safely commonplace; and yet there really are millions of Americans who would not understand the reference, and who really might, if they saw the Wolf of the Capitol, mistake it for a dirty statue. We must stubbornly remember this whenever polemicists begin to strike the Whitman note, and to ask for a poetry at once serious and universally understandable" (Responses, p. 18).

¹⁶John Berryman, "From the Middle and Senior Generation", American Scholar, XXVIII (1958-59), 384. Although Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke are labelled as "academics," Berryman notices a sharp contrast between them: "The contrast is so deep that one would almost be justified in adopting the terms 'eastern' and 'western' style, without much reference to the fact that Mr. Lowell is from Boston and lives there, Mr. Roethke from Michigan, living in Seattle. Lowell's work is Latinate, formal, rhetorical, massive, historical, religious, impersonal; Roethke's Teutonic, irregular, colloquial, delicate, botanical and psychological, irreligious, personal."

¹⁷Donald Hall, Introduction to Contemporary American Poetry, ed. Donald Hall (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962.), p. 20.

¹⁸"Richard Wilbur Talking to Joan Hutton", ed. Joan Hutton, Transatlantic Review, No. 29 (Summer 1968), 67. Two decades after the publication of The Beautiful Changes, Wilbur still had not abandoned his aesthetic stance expressed in the title poem. Hutton summed up Wilbur's poetics by referring to the following lines:

The beautiful changes
In such kind ways,
Wishing ever to sunder
Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

Wilbur replied: "A kind and gracious summary. Those lines are so old that they seem someone else's; and so I can assent to them without embarrassment."

¹⁹A. Alvarez, Introduction to The New Poetry, ed. A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 28.

²⁰Ibid., p. 27.

²¹See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 224.

²²Alvarez, pp. 27-28.

²³Ibid., pp. 28-29.

²⁴Anthony Ostroff, ed., The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic: Eight Symposia (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964), pp. 81-110.

²⁵Ibid., p. 99.

²⁶Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷Ibid., p. 110.

²⁸Richard Poirier, Robert Frost (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 136.

²⁹"On Robert Frost's 'The Gum-Gatherer'", Responses, p. 186. This article was written for a special Frost issue of Greg Kuzma's magazine Pebble in 1974.

³⁰Ibid., p. 187.

³¹The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 167.

³²Ibid., p. 67.

³³Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose by Wallace Stevens, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 172. Hereafter this title will be referred to as Opus Posthumous.

³⁴The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 65.

³⁵Ibid., p. 10.

³⁶See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", pp. 221-222.

³⁷Wilbur's letter to Wai, August 8. 1980.

³⁸"Poetry and Happiness", Responses, pp. 104-105. This article was written for a symposium on the arts at the College of Wooster, in Wooster, Ohio, in the spring of 1966.

³⁹Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 666.

⁴⁰"Poetry and Happiness", p. 112.

⁴¹Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 150.

⁴²The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 72.

⁴³René Taupin, L'influence du Symbolisme Français Sur la Poésie Américaine (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1975; Réimpression de l'édition de Paris, 1929), p. 276.

CHAPTER I

"THE PUBLISHED POET IN HIS HAPPINESS"

[P]oets of all kinds agree that it is the pleasure of the healthy imagination to achieve what Stevens called "ecstatic identities with the weather." When the sensibility is sufficient to the expression of the world, and when the world, in turn, is answerable to the poet's mind and heart, then the poet is happy, and can make his reader so.

--Richard Wilbur, "Poetry and Happiness"

"The pursuit of happiness," Richard Wilbur observes, is "the pursuit of self-realization, or of a full humane life."¹ A happy poet, according to him, is one who believes in and achieves "a perfect conversancy or congruence between self and world."² The aim of this alliance between self and world is to attain the right equilibrium between human vision and physical, literary, or spiritual experience.

"Self-realization" and "the world" are the two key terms which need defining. Self-realization is exploring and projecting the self. A poet does not simply rephrase what is already known, but rather articulates his intense, introspective observation. Yet his articulations are so precise and authentic that they give the poet himself new

insights into his own psychology, and the reader new insights into his. In this process of understanding and articulating his attitudes and emotions, the poet uses symbols, objects, and actions.³ Self-realization is in fact an artistic process, the artist being the eloquent spokesman for himself, his reader, the human race, and the cultures of the past and the present.

The term "world" may mean the Earth, the Universe, human societies, or what one can see and the mood in which one sees it. To Dante, the world was "a number of intelligibly related societies, actual and spiritual; his Commedia was the embodiment and criticism of a comprehensive notion of things that he shared with his age."⁴ These comments on Dante's artistic practice are, in fact, statements of Wilbur's own aesthetic ideal. He does not limit his interest to the world of phenomena; he tries to embrace the whole psyche of his time, represented by different human types, situations, and experiences, ranging from the most humble to the most sophisticated.

In his description of the physical world, Wilbur shows his belief in a natural bond between man and objects and in an ultimate natural order. He does not share the pessimistic world view of a Matthew Arnold or a Thomas Hardy. Arnold, saddened by the decline of Christian faith, writes:

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another ! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . .⁵

And Thomas Hardy in "The Darkling Thrush" compares "The tangled bine-stems" which "scored" the sky to "strings from [sic] broken lyres."⁶ Wilbur uses these two instances to illustrate man's gradual alienation from the phenomenal world. His comments on Hardy's simile are: "the natural object no longer analogically suggests the harmony of the creation and the music of the spheres, and . . . any confident lyric relation between man and the landscape has been invalidated."⁷

Concerning the dialogue with culture, Wilbur writes:

To be sure, every poet is a citizen of the Republic of Letters, that imaginary society whose members come from every age and literature, and it is part of his happiness to converse, as it were, with the whole of tradition; but is also his desire to put his gift at the service of the people of his own time and place.⁸

If a "poet is unable to realize himself as the spokesman and loyal critic of an adequate culture," Wilbur maintains, "I think that his art and life are in some measure deprived of satisfaction and meaning."⁹ Wilbur's theory recalls passages in Jonathan Swift's "The Battle of the Books," which debate the legitimacy of borrowing. The positions of the "Moderns" and the "Ancients" are represented by the spider and the bee respectively. The spider, proud of

its spinning out from itself, accuses the bee of theft:

What art thou but a Vagabond without House or Home,
without Stock or Inheritance? Born to no Possess-
ion of your own, but a Pair of Wings, and a
Drone-Pipe. Your Livelihood is an universal Plunder
upon Nature; a Freebooter over Fields and Gardens; and
for the sake of Stealing, will rob a Nettle as
readily as a Violet.¹⁰

And the bee replies:

I am come honestly by my Wings and my Voice, for
then, it seems, I am obliged to Heaven alone for my
Flights and my Musick; and Providence would never
have bestowed me two such Gifts, without designing
them for the noblest Ends. I visit, indeed, all
the Flowers and Blossoms of the Field and the
Garden, but whatever I collect from thence, enriches
my self.¹¹

Wilbur's aesthetic stance is an echo of the bee's conviction.

Wilbur selects Robert Frost's poem "Birches" to illustrate the various aspects involved in the relationship between self and world. In that poem, Frost covertly alludes to Shelley's "Adonais." The poetic phrases "Many-colored," "Glass," "The inner dome of Heaven,"¹² describing the birches loaded with ice on a sunny winter morning, are echoes of two famous lines from Shelley's poem:

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity.¹³

"Birches," however, offers a version of spirituality colored by the practical idealism of New England. Whereas Shelley sends Adonais-Keats on a one-way journey to the Absolute, Frost believes that "Earth's the right place

for love." Wilbur concludes his article "Poetry and Happiness" by saying: "Frost's poem does justice to the world, to self, to literary tradition, and to a culture; it is happy in all the ways in which a poem can be happy."¹⁴

1. Observer and Natural Objects

The poet who exposes himself to all human experiences is vigorously involved in the world of natural phenomena. A number of Wilbur's poems are hymns to or elegies for non-human objects. "The Death of a Toad" and "Cigales" are two of the many tributes to low forms of life. His respect for natural objects reflects his vision of the universe: all modes of existence are connatural. This concept of the universe is similar to that of Father Teilhard de Chardin:

The farther and more deeply we penetrate into matter, by means of increasingly powerful methods, the more we are confounded by the interdependence of its parts.¹⁵

This cosmic design is evident in the animal kingdom as well as in the human world in Wilbur's poetry. For example, "The ripped mouse, safe in the owl's talon, cries/Concordance" in "Beasts" (T.T.W., p. 35). In "The Giaour and the Pacha" (B.C., p. 15), the two enemies depend on each other for their identities. The Giaour, triumphant on his horse, suddenly realizes that the death of his "ancient enemy,"

"[t]he counterpoise of all my force and pride," terminates the meaning of the victor's life. Man and animal are also interrelated. The boy in "The Pardon" (C., p. 6) asks his dog to forgive his previous inability to accept death, whose imminence encompasses all forms of life. Hence the poet's responsiveness to the wonders of nature is not limited to sensuous pleasure per se. He mingles his precise descriptions of natural curiosities with his philosophical and aesthetic preoccupation. In Wilbur's description of mundane objects, the reader usually witnesses the working of an unintelligible life-force in the commonplace.

In "The Death of a Toad" (C., p. 40), as Wilbur himself points out, the toad is turned "into the primal energies of the world in the course of [the] poem."¹⁶ By inference, the poet transmits his belief that all forms of life--man, animal, and plant--come from the same source. The toad, "caught,/Chewed and clipped of a leg" by the lawn mower, dies "Toward some deep monotone" which is death the leveller. Through death, it reunites with the life-force from which it has been derived and regains its lost "emperies." It "sanctuaried" itself

Under the cineraria leaves, in the shade
Of the ashen heartshaped leaves, in a dim,
Low, and a final glade.

Nature seems to be in mourning for the death of one of its kind and provides a sanctuary for it. The word "sanctuaried"

implies the sanctity of life. The dying toad remembers the "Amphibia's" era when it enjoyed the dignity and status of an emperor. It reviews its own fall from dignity but also watches the decline of the human world:

Day dwindles, drowning, and at length is gone
In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear
To watch, across the castrate lawn,
The haggard daylight steer.

If the toad is the symbol of the primal energies of the world, man with his castrating power mower does not only destroy a toad; he is destroying the world of which he is a part. Man, who is the ruler of the world, has become the castrator and the castrated. The dominion of man is coming to an end as "The haggard daylight steer[s]" "across the castrate lawn." The decline of the human world is a re-enactment of the fall of "Amphibia's emperies."

The incongruity of the poem lies in the discrepancy between Wilbur's inflated language and the humbleness of the toad. It is almost impossible to take an elegy for a toad seriously. Irritated by this incongruity, Randall Jarrell writes:

When you read "The Death of a Toad," a poem
that begins A toad the power mower caught,/
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop
has got/To the garden verge, you stop to shudder
at the raw being of the world, at all that a
hobbling hop has brought to life--that toad is
real, all right. But when you read on, when Mr.
Wilbur says that the toad dies/Toward some deep
Monotone,/Toward misted and ebullient seas/And
cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies,

you think with a surge of irritation and dismay,
 "So it was all only an excuse for some Poetry."¹⁷

Wilbur himself admits: "I think I wanted to use it here as a kind of confession that I'm doing rather a lot with that toad. . . . And so I get a little bombastic as a way of acknowledging that I'm going rather far."¹⁸ One can view the poem as self-parody; Wilbur exaggerates his tendency to contemplate and to write about subjects which are most unlikely to be poetical. He is deliberately indulgent, as he expresses a concept which, he knows, is subject to laughter:¹⁹ kinship between man and toad. He laughs with those who find the idea ridiculous; yet he is steadfast in his conviction that man and objects, animate or inanimate, are interrelated. Each component of the universe, be it a human being, a natural object, or literary achievement, is an index to the indivisible All.

All the "hard evidence"²⁰ available to man is useless when it is applied to interpret the mysteries of the universe. In "Cigales" (B.C., p. 1),²¹ for example, Wilbur mocks man's futile effort to interpret non-human modes of existence. The poem consists of two sets of contrasts. The first contrast is between the cigale's instinctive singing and man's ceaseless rationalizing efforts. In spite of various human attempts to understand the cigale, it remains a puzzle, "uncomprehended."

Medieval religious writers assumed that the cigale was a
 "simple sign" of miracle

. . . because of his long waiting
 and sweet change in daylight, and his singing
 all his life, pinched on the ash leaf,
 heedless of ants.

The poet's satirical comments on the absurdity of abstract
 principles and theories devised by man culminate in the last
 three lines:

Fabre, by firing all the municipal cannon
 under a piping tree, found out
 cigales cannot hear.

The cigale's "gratuitous song," which ridicules human
 complacency, "springs healing questions into binding air."

Donald Hill's comments on the last stanza are worth quoting:

As he studied insect behavior, Fabre gradually came
 to believe that the theory of evolution, which claimed
 to explain so much, was invalid. Can these lines mean
 that our scientific air is too binding, that it is
 healthier to have unanswered questions than to imagine
 we can explain everything? In any case, "a piping
 tree" remains a kind of mystery, if not a miracle,
 by which the poet, like the earlier observers of
 whom he speaks in the fourth stanza, is "puzzled and
 joyed." He seems to be saying in effect, "Thank God
 there are things we can't explain," things simply
 given, things intractable to theorists, wonders
 on earth.²²

The second contrast is between the cigale's quick
 movements, sharp noise and the "swollen stasis" of "those
 windless summer evenings." Words which describe the cigale
 have short vowels, for example, "chirr" or "cri-cri,"
 "trick," and "quicken," whereas the other "too-substantial
 melodies," enhanced by the long vowels, are "rich as a/

running-down record, ground round/to full quiet." The crescendo of the cigale's high pitched cries and the diminuendo of the other hypnotic songs resemble the ebb and flow of the tide, a manifestation of universal order. The life history of the cigale demonstrates the alternating pattern of universal life. After a long period of waiting as a pupa, seventeen years altogether, it emerges and lives for only a few weeks. It sings "all his life, pinched on the ash leaf." Death, suggested by the "ash leaf," is the inevitable attachment to life. Heedless of its mortality, however, it instinctively alternates the "thick tongues" of nature with "a slim false-freshness" and its "thin uncomprehended song." Like the grasshopper in "A Grasshopper" (A.P., pp. 35-36) and the sea's "horses" in "A Problem From Milton" (C., p. 31), this chanter of mysteries, though unaware of either the meaning or the purpose of its singing, is part of the ordered universal design, which is sustained by an unintelligible life-force.

2. The Artist and the Republic of Letters

In addition to his involvement in the natural world, Wilbur is also an active participant in the Republic of Letters. He writes for an educated audience and reshapes their recollections of the arts of the past into a new

literary experience. Conversation with the past, according to Wilbur, is not meaningless borrowing. The titles of Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind and Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel, taken from Ernest Dowson's poem and Milton's "Lycidas" respectively, are examples of borrowing at the least significant level because each is irrelevant to the original text. On the other hand, "Mistah Kurtz--he dead"--one of the two quotations which preface T.S.Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men"--shows that Eliot skilfully summons up Conrad's art and thought. The epigraph, according to Wilbur, provides the key to the understanding of the poem: "the horror of Kurtz's moral emptiness" in Conrad's Heart of Darkness.²³ (Wilbur, however, admits that the epigraph has "a more complex intention than [he] allowed it" in a letter to me.)²⁴ Convinced that there is an "ever-present adaptive need to reshape the past,"²⁵ Wilbur maintains that "[a]ny writer on literature who is afraid to use inference and a trained intuition is in the wrong racket."²⁶

Wilbur is a poet who is well conversant with past artistic achievements and who tries to make them new. Sometimes, in the course of a poem, the poet progresses from observation of a photograph or a painting to a statement on art in general. Sometimes the poet is observing a physical phenomenon while his mind makes connections between that phenomenon and analogous experiences

recorded in artistic representations or in history. His immediate response to a particular physical situation is a desire to verbalize it. Sometimes, inspired by a cultural experience, he recreates it. The reader is persuaded by Wilbur's rhetoric to relive that particular experience in the way the poet wants him to relive it. "Looking Into History," "On the Marginal Way," and "Merlin Enthralled" illustrate the above-mentioned tendencies in Wilbur's poetry.

The narrator in "Looking Into History" (T.T.W., pp. 24-25) attempts to discover the relatedness of a seemingly "finished year" to the present while examining one of Mathew Brady's Civil War photographs. Astonished by the fixedness of the five soldiers, his "spellbound fathers" in the photograph, the narrator imagines himself to be "orphaned Hamlet." He feels "orphaned" because the past seems to be a stasis cut off from the living present. The narrator, well versed in literature, tries to converse with the spirit of his literary past, as Hamlet invokes the ghost of his father. Yet the phrase "finished year" suggests the end of an era and a civilization. The affected postures of the photographed soldiers and the old-fashioned "guns and gear" prevent the narrator from surmounting barriers of space and time to re-enter history. He can hardly believe that the photograph once did represent real life till he notices

"a file of trees/Verging a road that struggles up a hill."
 The familiar sycamores, which look the same in every era,
 revitalize the "subdued" life:

The long-abated breeze

Flares in those boughs I know, and hauls the sound
 Of guns and a great forest in distress.

The universal and timeless appearance of nature inspires the narrator to experience imaginatively the Civil War of a century ago. Art, like nature, should remain vital in spite of the passage of time. One special feature of the trees is that they are lined up like a file of soldiers. Wilbur takes "an old-fashioned view of the soldier," who, like the artist, represents a way "of transcending the self."²⁷ The military allusions in the poem demonstrate that the poet is, in fact, preoccupied specifically with the timelessness of culture and literature rather than with history in general.

At the end of the first movement, the narrator accepts his fate as an heir to the photographed soldiers, whom he addresses as "Fathers," and is ready to continue their missions "to fight at Wilderness." "Wilderness," as also in Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," may here be defined as raw reality untouched by human artifice. The battle against the "wilderness" is a combat between art and reality. The sycamores in the photograph do not grow haphazardly but are arranged along a road. And the

road, symbolic of civilization, "struggles up a hill." This struggle between human imagination and the physical world, between art and wild life, is enacted in Wallace Stevens' "Credences of Summer" in the form of a sexual battle between two grappling animals, striving to achieve a union:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three
 times
 The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips in savage scrutiny,
 Once to make captive, once to subjugate
 Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
 The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
 Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.²⁸

The unchanging appearance of the trees, which enlivens Brady's picture, can perform a similar trick and transport the narrator into both Shakespeare's and Homer's literary worlds of Macbeth and the Iliad:

But trick your eyes with Birnam Wood, or think
 How fire-cast shadows of the bankside trees
 Rode on the back of Simois to sink
 In the wide waters. Reflect how history's

Changes are like the sea's . . .

The imperatives instruct the narrator himself, more specifically here than in the first movement, how to develop a proper relation to his literary past. First, he must converse with it by stepping into it imaginatively. Second, he should meditate on how the flux of time is like the changes of the sea. The ebb and flow of the tidal waves, governed by the attraction between the "moon" and the "sun," are manifestations of the underlying order of the

universe. This incomprehensible life-force, which is both disintegrative and regenerative, permeates the second movement and expresses itself through the movements of the sea. It "mauls" and "mulls" and "shroud[s]" "the oldest hulls" but simultaneously renews the "evergreen" vegetations. The co-existence of images of life and images of death enhances this characteristic of the sea and the life-force alike. The "salvage of the world" is contrasted with the constantly renewing natural forces; the "confounded graves" of individual lives with "carageen memorials of trees." The "deathless cry" of the "charging" pebbles is the poet's tribute to undying human achievements which withstand the test of time. In the metaphor of "memorials," the poet skillfully blends the allusions to tree, soldier, and art together. Timeless art must reverberate with the energy which governs the universe.

The narrator finally grasps a present sense of the past in the last movement, when he says:

I start to understand:
The will will find no stillness
Back in a stilled land.

It is the artist's task to "muster" the spirit of the past, and he is free to choose the way he is to be influenced. The choice, which shows how skillfully he "borrows" from his literary predecessors, decides whether his art is of any lasting value. Wilbur makes a similar statement in

his article "Poetry's Debt to Poetry":

To be sure, there are people other than scribes, plagiarists, and forgers who copy art or try to; they are not in the full sense artists, and they cannot help it. Think of those who have aped the spare and additive Hemingway sentence, without having the peculiarly resigned sense of life that required it; or those who, with no apparent sense of its function, have copied that long Faulkner sentence which is so suitable for conveying simultaneities of awareness and action. And what of all those instant Welshmen of twenty years ago, who dropped everything and wrote in the distinctive rhapsodic manner of Dylan Thomas? . . . A commanding imagination, as many have said before me, steals not from one writer, but selectively from all writers, taking whatever will help in the articulation of its own sense of things.²⁹

The narrator in "Looking Into History" assumes a protean disposition, in "The shape of lion or leopard,/Boar, or watery snake," so that he can gain access to all literary resources, whose latent energy he revitalizes and channels into his own work:

art is prompted, in the first place, by other art, and . . . artists, however original, respond to other artists in various manners: by borrowing, theft, adaptation, translation, impersonation, parody, and so on.³⁰

The "impostures" may seem a "fraud," through which, however, the "impostor" broadens

his utterance . . . to say things he is not yet able to say in his own person. That sounds disgraceful, but it need not be. You can't translate, after all, without having an affinity for the original. If you bring over the ghazals of Saadi into English, . . . then you have done three things: you have improved the English reader's access to the genius of Persia, you have provided English poetry with some new Persian tricks, and you have rendered more articulate that part of you which

resembles Saadi. It was something like this last result, I think, that came of Roethke's impersonation of Yeats. . . . Roethke's impersonation of Yeats seems to me to have kept him talking, to have limbered, emboldened, and extended him, so that he became capable of those last poems which are better than ever and so much more his own.³¹

In turn, the poet wants to "Father the waiting past" or to act as a liaison between the past and the future. He is both "continuator and modifier" of the tradition of "poetic literature."³² He synthesizes traditional conventions and subject matter with his own inventions and bequeaths his accomplishments to the next generation. The animal imagery of the poem, and the "comber break," seem to imply that the narrator wants to reconcile different types of elemental forces, the force of the "wilderness" and the force of the "sea."

The "self-established tree" joins the various images of nature and water together. The tree is an image of the poet himself, who maintains a balance between versatility and self-identity:

The self-established tree
That draws all waters toward
Its live formality.

The word "formality" is a pun. First, it is a contrast to the protean disposition. More importantly, "formality" refers to the poet's adapting of strict forms and conventional meters to express his personal poetic vision. In doing so, he extends the poetic tradition he has inherited.

The poet draws on "all waters," though he has his own unique voice. "Looking into History" can be seen as Wilbur's defense against the accusation that he is derivative.

"On the Marginal Way" (W.S., pp. 5-8) is evidence of Wilbur's art of allusion. While he muses upon the effect of the change of light on his imagination, he compares the immediate landscape with similar scenes described by George Borrow or painted by Géricault. The poet looks at the strange rock formations and the weathered "cove of shale" as the sun alternately shines on them and clouds over them. Physically he is standing on the beach, a margin between land and sea; metaphorically, his mind hovers between "facts" and "fancies," hope and despair. With a few exceptions and variations, the arrangement of the stanzas corresponds to this contention between observation and imagination, or to the juxtaposition of one scene with another. The intricate six-line stanza arrangement roughly falls into this pattern: each stanza is divided into two halves, yet they are linked together by the fourth line. The fourth line of each stanza completes the abba rhyme scheme of the first four lines and runs on to the following couplet, which depicts a scene analogous to the one described in the first half of the stanza. The first half presents the "facts" and the second the "fancies." The

first stanza, which begins with the physical appearance of "Another cove of shale" and ends with Wilbur's recollection of George Borrow's report of "A hundred women basking in the raw" by a Spanish shore, sets the pattern for the stanzas that follow. The poet's mind connects the immediate scene to similar scenes of the past, represented in art or recorded in history--especially those that correspond with "the time's fright within" him. The Vietnam War being the backdrop, this poem is prompted by the poet's fear of the possibility of another holocaust. Both Géricault's painting "of blood and rape" and "Auschwitz' final kill" testify to the fact that man is both destroyer and victim. Yet the poet seeks consolation in external phenomena, namely regenerative changes. The crucial statement--

It is not tricks of sense
But the time's fright within me which distracts
Least fancies into violence
And makes my thought take cover in the facts

--is strategically placed in the middle of the poem and divides it into two equal halves, juxtaposing historical scenes of death and violence with the formation of the earth and its ceaseless renewal.

The first half progresses from "Least fancies" to "violence"; from George Borrow's idyllic scene of "A hundred women basking in the raw" in The Bible in Spain to a Géricault painting³³ of "Some desert town despoiled, some caravan/Pillaged, its people murdered to a man" and

on to "Auschwitz' final kill." The warmth of the sun and Borrow's lack of sexual desire for the naked bathers in the first scene are replaced by hot-blooded murder and rape in the second, and "a colder lust" in Nazi Germany in the third. In the second scene, the murderers have galloped off, leaving "a rumpling line of dust/Like the wave's white, withdrawing hem." The unusual usage of "withdrawing" as an adjective reminds the reader of "Dover Beach," in which Arnold uses the word in a similar fashion to describe the retreating sea of faith. Both Wilbur and Arnold are observing the sea, and in the course of observation draw parallels between the perceived experience and the human situation in general. Like Arnold, Wilbur perhaps hints at the decline of Christian values. "Melting" and "withdrawing" suggest an entropic process leading towards non-existence, "nada." Sound and fury in the second scene become dead silence in the third, in which the distinguishable bodies of the first two scenes are "Bulldozed at last into a common grave." "At last" and "final" suggest that degradation of man has completed its full cycle and that Auschwitz is the ultimate example of man's brutality.

Yet the rocks also remind the poet of a greater artist than George Borrow and Géricault: God, who creates the universe. The narrator turns from the dark musings of his mind to external facts, in which he finds reassurance

of a natural order. The imagined, disjointed parts of the body are literally rocks, whose present shapes are formed by natural forces. Both rocks and the human species are, in fact, connatural in the grand scheme of the universe. The poet resumes his comparison of the rocks to man: shapeless molten "magmas" are transformed into numerous forms which,

Weathered until the sixth and human day
By sanding winds and water, scuffed and brayed
By the slow glacier's heel, . . . were made

That now recline and burn
Comely as Eve and Adam . . .

Consoled by the certitude of life's regenerative continuation, he views the immediate scene in front of him in a different perspective. He distinctly identifies what he has seen earlier in the second stanza--disjointed "rondure, crease, and orifice,/Lap, flank, and knee" scattered on the sand--as three girls lying "golden in the lee/Of a great arm or thigh." The description of the three young girls has a sexual overtone, suggestive of fertility. This affirmative attitude results in a reversal of the order of his comparison: instead of comparing a natural phenomenon to an analogous human situation, the poet's mind moves from human strife to natural harmony. "[S]pread wings of newsprint," which "flap/The tidings of some dirty war," are transformed into the clapping "hands" of "the waters" and the wings of "the gull in flight." War recurs throughout history, but the destructiveness of war is contrasted with

the beauty of nature and the continuation of life. "It is a perfect day," in spite of human imperfections. The poem ends on an optimistic note:

And like a breaking thought
Joy for a moment floods into the mind,
Blurting that all things shall be brought
To the full state and stature of their kind,
By what has found the manhood of this stone.
May that vast motive wash and wash our own.

As part of the natural order, men may conceivably be brought "To the full state and stature of their kind." The poet trusts that "the vast motive" which renews the universe also cleanses the impurities of the human world. However, "for a moment" implies that his joyous thought is momentary and that the debate between the two contrasting thought currents will recur from time to time. This joyous moment of certainty is only a "break," a recess, and his faith in "that vast motive" is only a prayer.

As he does in "On the Marginal Way," Wilbur recurrently shows that he is imaginatively stimulated by his acquaintance with earlier culture. "Merlin Enthralled" (T.T.W., pp. 17-18) is based on the Arthurian legends, in which Merlin recognized Arthur's kingship after Arthur had extracted the great sword Excalibur from the stone. Afterwards Merlin served as Arthur's most trusted aid, but then he disappeared mysteriously. According to some sources, Merlin had been bewitched by Niniane, a water-

nymph, who was in fact Merlin's own magical creation. Thus Wilbur describes her as "A creature" who has "bewitch[ed] a sorcerer." The surviving knights, under the leadership of Gawain, set out in search of Merlin, whose faith and ideals have created and upheld the whole Arthurian era. They depended on Merlin for his vision and his interpretation of the mystery of the universe. With Merlin gone, "In all the world was no unnatural sound." They are alienated from the mysterious wonders of Nature because their limited vision fails to penetrate beyond her incomprehensible surface. The "drained cups" symbolize the end of their career as questers.

Wilbur retells Merlin's retreat into Niniane's captivity with a complete control of tempo and sound:

That Siren's daughter
 Rose in a fort of dreams and spoke the word
Sleep, her voice like dark diving water;
 And Merlin slept, who had imagined her
 Of water-sounds and the deep unsoundable swell . . .

The lengthy sentence, describing the "Siren's daughter," flows gracefully and slowly. The slow pace enhances the dream-like quality of the landscape. The comma after "Sleep" puts a sudden stop to the suspense-building movement and emphasizes her fatal pronouncement. The short decisive clause, "And Merlin slept," makes the crucial moment stand out from the preceding description of Niniane and the

succeeding portrayal of Merlin. The following is another example of Wilbur's masterful use of rhythm:

Until his mind, as clear as mountain water,
Went raveling toward the deep transparent dream
Who bade him sleep. And then the Siren's daughter
Received him as the sea receives a stream.

The two initial shorter phrases portray the mind at the threshold of the hypnotic state. The slow tempo of the sentence describes Merlin's gradual falling into a deep sleep. Merlin succumbs to Niniane, a spirit, and he upsets the dynamic balance between the ideal and the practical striving towards the ideal. His sleep, which is "as clear as mountain water," is suggestive of drowning and of suicide. His enthrallment is a dream, resulting from his negation of the physical world. At its best, his attempt to transcend time and to unite with the timeless is like the efforts of an artist who turns reality into static art. Similarly, the knights become an artistic composition, a medieval tapestry:

Their mail grew quainter as they clopped along.
The sky became a still and woven blue.

Wilbur's poetry does stress the fact that man must accept change as the unalterable reality of life, though he instinctively aspires to become one with timeless eternity. Man longs for an escape from the time-bound world of mutability to an imaginary ideal world. This insatiable desire has serious repercussions. Wilbur associates Merlin's retreat to his dream with the decline of a civilization,

the fall of Arthur's kingdom, and the end of history:

Slowly the shapes of searching men and horses
Escaped him as he dreamt on that high bed:
History died; he gathered in its forces;
The mists of time condensed in the still head . . .

However, the accomplishments of Camelot are commemorated in legends and are bequeathed to succeeding generations. The quest of the knights of the Round Table ends, but their achievements have been wrought into art. This unresolved dilemma between dynamic transience and static permanence will be discussed further in the fourth chapter of this thesis. The contention of opposites is a recurring subject in Wilbur's poetry.

3. Man and World

A tentative balance of opposites is suggested in "Water Walker" and "Walking to Sleep." Both poems express Wilbur's concept of a proper relationship between man and world. "Water Walker" is concerned with a paradoxical reconciliation of contrasted attitudes towards the multifarious world, while "Walking to Sleep" shows the possible kinship of cosmic polarities, for example, life and death. The poem "Water Walker," like life, is a continuum; it consists of one sentence only and is filled with opposites: caddis-fly and man, infidel and Christian, gentile and Jew, travellers and residents, past and present,

air and water. The individual should be a part of, yet separated from, historical events and contemporaneous lives. In "Walking to Sleep" Wilbur advises the reader to have "the courage simply to expose [himself] to everything, and take what comes, and be sure that in some mysterious way it is good."³⁴

In "Water Walker" (B.C., pp. 2-4), the poet portrays a number of individuals who do not limit themselves to a single purpose. The poet compares himself to an infidel who, despite his agony in searching for commitment, refuses to sell himself to any standardized doctrine or to delude himself into accepting ready-made ease and comfort, the "smoothest-worn pew," for example. The insecurity of the infidel, suggested by his wandering and his tears, parallels the vulnerability of the caddis-fly. However, as it dwells on the water-surface, it is in close contact with air and water and knows both worlds. Yet it is the tension with which it lives that gives a unique character to its existence. Another analogy is Paulsaul, "the Jew born in Tarshish." Being both Jew and Roman, he knew both worlds, his dual identity being indicated by his own name "Paulsaul." Paul, who could have enjoyed his revered status, ventured out from his Jewish security and seclusion to go on a mission to the gentiles. His adventures widened his horizons. This adventurous spirit is essential to an artist,

who has to be "fearfully free" ("Objects," B.C., p. 24), in his artistic endeavors. The poet himself in both Virginia and Illinois has dreaded the possibility of being absorbed in the local ways of living and becoming metaphorically a larva under water, "armored," "dreaming," and suffocated. He would rather remain non-committal, observing historical movements and conflicting points of view. He praises only whatever deserves his praise. He cherishes the detachment that makes him suffer but that helps him to transcend local and cultural uniformity.

The stylistic symmetry of "Water Walker" enhances the sense of the poem: a balance of opposites. Paulsaul, for example, could have stayed in Tharsos, but

He carried Jew visions to Greeks
For adoration or curses;
For he
Troubled them; whether they called him "babbler" or
hailed him "Mercurios"

Each line has a pair of opposites--"Jew" and "Greeks"; "adoration" and "curses"; and "babbler" and "Mercurios." Of one phenomenon, there can be two diametrically contradictory interpretations. The poet chooses the fate of Paulsaul and that of the caddis-fly, who live in two worlds and, as strangers to both worlds, are not restricted to one view. The poet, like Paul, exhibits his desire to explore the many facets of a society which is homogeneous in appearance but diversified in reality. He holds

Here in my head Maine's bit speech, lithe laughter
of Mobile blacks,
Opinions of salesmen, ripe tones of priests,
Plaints of the bought and sold . . .

Wilbur understands that

There are risks of corruption, then, in becoming a poet-citizen rather than an alienated artist, but I myself would consider them risks well taken, because it seems to me that poetry is sterile unless it arises from a sense of community or, at least, from the hope of community. I think this is true even in America, where beneath so much surface homogeneity there lies a radical commitment to diversity and to the toleration of dissent. We are not a settled and monolithic nation; we are not really one culture, and we offer our artists no Byzantine advantages. Yet the incoherence of America need not enforce a stance of alienation in the poet; rather, it may be seen as placing on him a peculiar imaginative burden, and committing him perhaps to something like Yeats's long and loyal quarrel with his native Ireland.³⁵

As a poet-citizen, he asks himself:

Can I rest and observe unfold

The imminent singletax state,
The Negro rebellion, the rise
Of the nudist cult, the return
Of the Habsburgs, watch and wait
And praise
The spirit and not the cause, and neatly precipitate
What is not doctrine, what is not bound
To enclosed ground; what stays?

This amalgamated list of phenomena and movements--local and international, obsolete and current--indicates his American heritage of multi-cultural, multi-racial experiences and memories, and his reluctance to evaluate them before a long period of careful consideration. He must "watch and wait," like the caddis-fly which "must lie/Long under water," before he distinguishes the significant from the inconse-

quential, the universal from the provincial. He refuses to rush himself to any commitment though he "despairs and burns," as the infidel does, because of his dilemma. The Water Walker who represents a successful balance of opposites is unquestionably Jesus; Christ the God-Man was the one who once walked on a lake. Since the Water Walker is Christ, Wilbur seems to suggest that the maintenance of such a balance is a miracle. Yet this equilibrium is also an ideal to which man should aspire.

Wilbur expresses a similar outlook on life in the much later poem "Walking to Sleep" (W.S., pp. 53-58). Under the guise of giving advice to an insomniac on how to fall asleep, the poet compares two different attitudes towards existence. The walking itself represents a way of life, and sleep is a metaphor for death. The poem, divided into two parts, is a debate between the rejection of and commitment to life; as will become apparent, the poet opts for the latter.

The first approach begins with assurance:

As a queen sits down, knowing that a chair will be
there,
Or a general raises his hand and is given the field-
glasses,
Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.

The first walker takes every precaution to guarantee his safety from any possible danger in life and his detachment from its attractions. The dangerous, uncharted sea is

guarded by friendly dolphins to ensure the absence of
 perils. Images of security in this poem, however, are asso-
 ciated with death and bondage. As an example, "Cheops lay
 secure" in his "stone tent" because he is dead and imprison-
 ed in his tomb. The first walker's journey is "pointless"
 and "ever-dimming." At the outset, his path has certain
 signs of life, "tussocks or a dusty flower" for example,
 though he should not let the fields "be too velvet green."
 But the landscape becomes progressively bleaker: all signs
 of trees have disappeared, and green vegetation is replaced
 by "dry" and "grey" lichens. "[W]hat you project/Is what
 you will perceive" implies that the walker is free to
 define his own existence, and he chooses to limit his
 vision to the "lifeless" and "leafless" scenes:
 "A dull hallway," "drifts and rubbly tunnels," or "a
 dinted rock-face/Peppered with hacks and drill-holes," and
 "a vacant barrack." These places show evidence of previous
 human habitation and labor, but the inhabitants, workers,
 and soldiers are gone. Each place that the first walker
 visits is filled with signs of death, be it an Egyptian
 pyramid or "some cathedral's pillared crypt," or "A land-
 scape not worth looking at, some bleak/Champaign at dead
 November's end." The walker, in fact, belongs to the attic
 "full/Of glassy taxidermy": he looks alive, but he is
 spiritually dead. Life being so dreary, he welcomes death;

and thus, sleep is the "kind assassin":

Right in the middle of your stride, like that,
 So neatly that you never feel a thing,
 The kind assassin Sleep will draw a bead
 And blow your brains out.

Although the advisor seems to be giving viable suggestions, he has his tongue in his cheek, almost in mockery of anyone who takes his advice seriously. Moreover, he keeps interrupting the bleak dreamscape with scenes of horror and beauty drawn from life. Although he advises the walker to shun all provocative views, be they "love or terror," the graphic details unquestionably must have created a strong visual impact on the listener. "Love" and "terror," two predominant aspects of life, are appropriately illustrated by the allusions to the Incarnation and Crucifixion. The "Potemkin barns," the stanchion-rattle," the "sweet breath of silage" recreate the Nativity scene, whose message is love. The "trotting cat whose head is but a skull" refers to the Passion of Christ on Calvary. ("Skull" in Latin is calvaria.) The "fresh-painted hex signs" have at least two meanings. First, the birth of Christ is a curse on Satan. Second, these signs of ill omen foreshadow the death of the Holy Infant. The oxymoron "sparkling gloom" possibly suggests the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, His death and His triumph. Scenes of "terror" and "love" recur: the "upstart boulder which a flicking shape/Has stepped behind," and the "love-bed" which is

"warm[ed]" by sunlight and "cool[ed]" by wind. Furthermore, the speaker reminds the walker of specific sensory pleasures in life that he misses. Being a "numb and grudging" inspector of life, he denies himself the fragrance of the "yellow freesias," the sight of a "pleasant room," and the touch of "lemonwood." The speaker carefully describes the attractiveness of the woman with whom he could have shared the "love bed," and the texture of her "lithe and sleek" skin. These vivid details undoubtedly keep the walker wide awake, either dreading "the known stranger ahead" or missing the vital ecstasies. Well aware of the effect of his advice, the speaker humorously asks the rhetorical question: "What, are you still awake?" Then he offers the insomniac a more desirable approach to sleep.

In direct contrast to the security of the first approach, the second approach is an adventure, the spirit of which is suggested by such words as "risk," "wild," "storm," and "carelessness." Despite "the claws/Of nightmare," the second walker is praiseful. With faith, he exposes himself to all the possibilities in life and does not shun scenes which may provoke fear and passion. He keeps his eyes open to the darkness of his room and trusts that "the sky . . . is over it." The oxymorons, "good blackness" and "dearest horror," for example, imply the dual nature of each individual experience, its horror

and its beauty. The "honeyed meadows . . . might tempt/
A wolf to graze." The walker appreciates the constantly
changing appearances of nature--"the thrush's quirky glee/
In stands of chuted light" in spring or the "barren" trees
in winter.

Furthermore, the images of water, associated with
mystery, faith, and risk, are quite different from those
in the first journey. Like a ship lost at sea, the quester
is uncertain of his destiny. The sea, unguarded by dolphins,
retains its potential danger and mystery. It symbolizes
not only the flux of human existence, but also timelessness
and eternal life. The "Gennesaret" reference recalls the
Biblical episode, in which Christ chided His disciples for
lacking in faith and then ordered the stormy Sea of Galilee
to be calm again. This Biblical allusion suggests the poet's
faith in a benevolent universe, even though the universe
may appear to be anything but benevolent at times.

Thus the second walker dauntlessly confronts death.
At a "crossroads," he lifts his "gaze" at the "gallows
tree" and "stare[s] his brother down,/Though the swart crows
have pecked his sockets hollow." In other words he must
accept death as a close kin to life. These images of the
Crucifixion elaborate the oxymoron, "good blackness," in
the early part of the second approach. The horror of death
is embodied in the "swart crows"; but this blackness is

good because the Crucifixion is also an image of redemption. Wilbur, however, is not a poet of religious orthodoxy, though his philosophical groundwork is based on Christian doctrine. The Christian archetypes provide him above all with an abundance of metaphors on which his imagination can work.

Life and death, two opposing but inseparable entities of the universal scheme, are sustained by the Godhead either in the form of Christ or Vishnu. The resolution of "Walking to Sleep" is a telescoped version of "the Romance of the Goddess" in Hindu mythology.³⁶ Vishnu, the Hindu god, "can be regarded as the aspect that embraces the totality, tranquilly sustaining everything within himself, as a peaceful slumberer sustains the breathtaking incidents of a dream."³⁷ "Māyā" is "the World-Illusion of Vishnu himself She is the genetrix of all being."³⁸ The pool is "the divine Milky Ocean, the infinite and immortal sea of Vishnu's bliss--the timeless water upon which the supreme god, Vishnu, sleeps and dreams the dream of the world."³⁹ Vishnu transcends the limitation of space and time, symbolized by Maya, by embracing her. In him, all irreconcilable opposites are finally reconciled: death and life, illusion and reality, sea and land, time and timelessness. Reflecting the harmonious union of Vishnu and Maya, dream and reality in the second journey are inseparable. The quest may lead to initiation, maturity,

and wisdom, but these rewards are not guaranteed. The chance of the walker's stumbling into Vishnu's presence depends entirely on his "luck." Vishnu's consort, however, is the patroness of fortune, who will guide a perceptive quester to Vishnu's abode. But the possibility is that Vishnu represents only an "old story," whose credibility is not yet proven. Despite all the uncertainties, Wilbur believes that the beauty of life is, in fact, in its unpredictability, and that true "happiness" can only be gained through self-exposure to life's endless contradictions.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

¹"Poetry and Happiness", Responses, p. 91.

²Ibid., p. 103.

³Ibid., p. 100.

⁴Ibid., p. 108.

⁵Cited in Richard Wilbur, "Poetry and the Landscape", in The New Landscape in Art and Science, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co., 1956), p. 87.

⁶Quoted by Wilbur, Ibid., p. 87.

⁷Ibid., p. 87.

⁸"Poetry and Happiness", Responses, p. 108.

⁹Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁰Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub and Other Satires, ed. Kathleen Williams (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1975), p. 149.

¹¹Ibid., p. 149.

¹²"Poetry and Happiness", Responses, p. 113. Wilbur quotes the following lines for illustration:

Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust--
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

¹³Quoted by Wilbur, "Poetry and Happiness", Responses, p. 113.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 114

¹⁵Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 44.

¹⁶"The Poems of Richard Wilbur", in the film series Of Poets and Poetry, produced by the Metropolitan Educational Television Association, released by National Educational Television and Radio Center, 1959, cited in Donald Hill, Richard Wilbur (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 80.

¹⁷Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 228.

¹⁸"The Poems of Richard Wilbur", in the film series Of Poets and Poetry, quoted by Hill, p. 80.

¹⁹See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 215. Wilbur told his interviewer: "You can prove, by way of Darwin, your kinship with the animals, but if you want to feel that you have a kind of communion with certain animals, that is a matter of faith. It is unprovable, and it is subject to the laughter of others."

²⁰See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 215.

²¹Wilbur changed "Cigales" to "Cicadas" in Poems 1943-1956 (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), but he restores the title "Cigales" in The Poems of Richard Wilbur (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963).

²²Hill, p. 29.

²³"Poetry's Debt to Poetry", Responses, pp. 164-165. Wilbur states: "This essay was given as the Joseph Warren Beach Memorial Lecture, at the University of Minnesota, on April 27, 1972. It later appeared in The Hudson Review" (Responses, p. 161).

²⁴Wilbur's letter to Wai, March 6, 1980. In my letter to him, I wrote: "I think I have a slightly different opinion of Kurtz. The quotation, 'Mistah Kurtz--he dead,' shows the ultimate end of Kurtz's descent into the underworld, yet he is not a 'hollow man.' Disillusioned with the emptiness of conventional morality, he has at least the courage to reject it altogether and to fight horror with horror. Whereas the 'hollow men' evade any commitments or actions, Kurtz explores

the possibilities of living in an inverted order. T. S. Eliot himself, in his essay on Baudelaire, says: 'it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist.' Is it possible that Eliot uses Kurtz as an ironic parallel to the hollow men?"

And Wilbur replied: "I think you make a good case for the epigraph's having a more complex intention than I allowed it. In Dante, one somehow feels most contempt for those paltry people who were neither for the angels nor for the devils. Perhaps Kurtz, despite his dying words, may be seen as having "explored the possibilities of living in an inverted order."

²⁵"Poetry's Debt to Poetry", Responses, p. 162.

²⁶Ibid., p. 184.

²⁷See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 231. Wilbur told his interviewer: "Yeats used to say there are three kinds of people that matter-- the poet or rather the artist, the saint, and the soldier-- and I suppose he is talking about different kinds of discipline and ways of transcending the self. The soldier at his best does represent an admirable sort of discipline, of escape from the self, and a developed competence, so that my references to soldiers or my use of military terms are often positive."

²⁸The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 376.

²⁹"Poetry's Debt to Poetry", Responses, pp. 166-167.

³⁰Ibid., p. 184.

³¹Ibid., p. 169.

³²Wilbur praises Robert Frost as an heir to his literary past: "he was a conscious continuator and modifier of the tradition. Formally, he adapted the traditional meters and conventions to the natural cadence and tenor of New England speech. Then as for content, while he did not echo the poetry of the past so promiscuously as T. S. Eliot, he was always aware of what else has been written on any subject, and often implied as much" ("Poetry and Happiness", Responses, p. 112).

³³Wilbur "had in mind a particular kind of

painting rather than any one canvas." Wilbur's letter to Wai, March 6, 1980. In my letter to him, I wrote: "I cannot find a painting by Géricault which fits the description of "blood and rape" that you referred to in 'On the Marginal Way.' A professor of the Department of Fine Arts suggested that you might have Delacroix's 'Massacre of Chios' in mind instead. Was he correct? (Undoubtedly, Delacroix was inspired by Géricault's 'Raft of the Medusa' when he painted 'Chios.') Both paintings are filled with fallen bodies, either dead or dying."

Wilbur replied: "[Y]our suggestions of the Radeau of Géricault and of the Delacroix's 'Massacre' are right in the bull's-eye."

³⁴See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 216.

³⁵"On My Own Work", Responses, p. 116. This essay was written at the request of Howard Nemerov, Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and later was published in Shenandoah, XVII (Autumn 1965), 57-67; reprinted in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966), pp. 160-171.

³⁶Heinrich Zimmer, The King and the Corpse, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., and Pantheon Books Inc., 1957), pp. 239-306.

³⁷Ibid., p. 240.

³⁸Ibid., p. 255-256.

³⁹Ibid., 256.

CHAPTER II

HUMAN VISION AND THE KALEIDOSCOPIC WORLD

Everything in the world is strange and marvellous to well-open eyes. This faculty of wonder is the delight . . . which leads the intellectual man through life in the perpetual ecstasy of the visionary. His special attribute is the wonder of the eyes. Hence it was that the ancients gave Minerva her owl, the bird with ever-dazzled eyes.

--José Ortega y Gasset, Revolt of the Masses

Wilbur shares José Ortega y Gasset's idea of vision.¹ "If art is a window," Wilbur pointed out in 1950, "then the poem is . . . a partial vision of a part of the world. It is the means of a dynamic relation between the eye within and the world without."² Over twenty-five years later, Wilbur still maintains this aesthetic stance. In reply to Peter Stitt's question concerning poetic inspiration, Wilbur said, in March 1977:

It seems to me that there has to be a sudden, confident sense that there is an exploitable and interesting relationship between something perceived out there and something in the way of incipient meaning within you. And what you see out there has to be seen freshly, or the process is not going to be provoked.³

His unresolved feelings about the nature of reality and

his vision of it are similar to the recurring debate in Wallace Stevens: whether "man is the intelligence of his soil,"⁴ or "his soil is man's intelligence."⁵ Stevens wonders whether man's mind is superior to objective reality or vice versa. The difficult balance between imagination and reality, as Roy Harvey Pearce observes, is a continual theme in American poetry, and one that has a central place in as early a writer as Emerson:

For him [Emerson] the disjunction of the worlds of reality and imagination was a temporary historical accident (whereas for Poe it had been intrinsic in the nature of man).⁶

Wilbur, who accuses Poe of divorcing imagination from reality, believes that the worlds of reality and imagination should be harmoniously synthesized. An artist, according to both Emerson and Wilbur, gives order and meaning to the phenomena that he perceives. This endeavor--in particular in the writer--to achieve a balance between human vision and the physical world is, indeed, a creative process.

1. Human Vision

The function of human vision is at least two-fold: to give the visible objects "due regard" ("The Eye," M.R., p. 8), and to perceive the hidden truth underlying their physical appearances. To maintain a

balanced, reciprocal relationship with the world, the viewer should not have an insatiable desire to simplify its complexities or to abstract the uniqueness of its objects or to idealize its imperfections. The poet's vision is to discover the cosmic harmony beneath the apparently fragmented world and, as in a kaleidoscope, to arrange a design which holds the disparate images together.

Vision is not only a sensory activity--it also carries serious moral implications. In the poem "On the Eyes of an SS Officer" (B.C., p. 11), Wilbur criticizes the faulty vision of the Nazis in general and an SS Officer in particular. The poem consists of three self-contained and end-stopped stanzas, each describing a fanatic: Amundsen, a Bombay saint, and the SS Officer. The first two stanzas complement and contrast each other. Whereas Amundsen was "An amorist of violent virgin snows," the Bombay saint worshipped the "acetylene eye." Both suffered in their attempt to penetrate into the mysteries of nature, "Amundsen, enormously bit/By arch-dark flurries on the ice plateaus," and the Bombay saint reduced to "An eclipsed mind in a blind face."

The word "But," which begins the third stanza, indicates that the SS Officer is a foil to the two previously described fanatics. His eyes are "iced or ashen," like those of Amundsen and the Bombay saint. Unlike theirs,

however, the SS Officer's eyes are "Foul purities." The explorer and the Hindu, fascinated by natural purities, brought harm to themselves only. But the faulty vision of the Nazi has resulted in a holocaust. The word "ashen" has a double meaning: the non-German nationalities, especially Jews, are burnt to ashes because the eyes of the SS Officer are "ashen." He is blinded spiritually by his concept of a perfect state. Yet he justifies his foul play by his vision of purity. The poet asks his "makeshift God" of the affluent, ever-changing world to damn the eyes of the SS Officer, for they have scorched His Creation.

The SS Officer is one example of spiritual blindness; and "the Club" in "In a Bird Sanctuary" (B.C., pp. 17-18) is another. "The Club" represents the "Commissioners of Public Parks" and bird experts. The poem is a satire on these short-sighted individuals. They reserve sanctuaries for birds in order

. . . to buy release
for one restrained department of the soul,
to "make men whole."

Yet the birds have an order of their own: their movements express the natural rhythm of the cosmos. Those who are blind to this natural rhythm find the birds erratic:

It's hard to tell the purpose of a bird;
for relevance it does not seem to try.
No line can trace no flute exemplify
its traveling; it darts without the word.

Who wills devoutly to absorb, contain,
birds give him pain.

The poem also satirizes the selfishness of man, who denies non-human modes of existence the freedom that he fights for, commemorates, and cherishes. The bird sanctuary is limited in space "Because they [the Club] could not give it too much ground." The birds unknowingly remind man of his selfishness by standing in Faneuil Hall, known as "the cradle of liberty," where the founders of the American War of Independence once met. Living in a society sustained by the principles of liberty, the Americans should honor the freedom of the birds:

The liberty of any things becomes
the liberty of all. It also brings
their abolition into anythings.

Wilbur's vision of the world reflects his belief that all modes of existence are mysteriously related. He advises:

In order's name let's not turn down our thumbs
on routine visions; we must figure out
what all's about.

The word "routine" means "commonplace" or "naturally possessed." Thus "routine visions" may refer to commonplace objects: the potato, the toad, and the grasshopper. Close observation of commonplace objects may help man to "figure out" the mystery of existence. "Routine visions" may also mean that perceptive insight is naturally possessed by man. When used wisely, vision enables man to perceive

the not fully intelligible cosmic order, of which he is a part. Yet the poet's advice "to figure out what all's about" can be ironic. In the name of public order, the poet wittily suggests, the administration must "figure out" the unpredictable behavior of the birds and regulate their affairs. The fifth stanza, written all in capital letters, is a public proclamation, an attempt of "the Club" to administer the affairs of the birds:

BIRDS HAVE BEEN SEEN IN TOWERS AND ON ISLES;
 ALSO ON PRIVY TOPS, IN FANEUIL HALL;
 BIRDS HAVE SOME OF THEM NOT BEEN SEEN AT ALL;
 BIRDS, IF THEY CARE TO, WALK ALONG IN FILE.
 BIRDS DO NOT FEEL ESPECIALLY GOOD IN FLIGHT:
 LET'S TREAT THEM RIGHT!

The reader may well wonder about the bearing of Wilbur's statements about order on his own poetic "contriving." Although the poem might seem to be an imitation of the rigidity of the highly contrived sanctuary, it can be in fact seen as a parody of his own style.

Another poem concerned with the moral implications of vision is "The Eye" (M.R., pp. 7-8) wherein the poet is on vacation at John Brinn's rented mountain villa in St. Thomas, the West Indies.⁷ Commenting on the genesis of this poem, Wilbur refers to his related experiences in the late 1940's and early 1950's:

It is hard to say when the poem started,
 because I have been thinking about the various
 senses, and the justice of their perceptions, for
 many years. Back in the late 1940s and early '50s,

when I was teaching at Harvard, I used to give my short-story writing classes exercises in description calculated to make my students aware of what the use of each sense might mean for the perceiver and for the thing or person perceived. At the same time, when lecturing on W.C. Williams, I used to make much of the immediacy or "contact" which he gained by a stress on the so-called "lower" senses, and I would generally quote D.H. Lawrence in support of Williams' aesthetic position--a position which was ultimately moral. Though not terribly fond of Lawrence's poem New Heaven and Earth, I recall being impressed at that time by the fact that the spiritual revolution which the poem describes is based upon a tactile experience--that the poet's escape from self, and his discovery of others, comes about through touch.⁸

The poem might have started in the late 1940's, but it took shape in 1975, and shares with some of Wilbur's other recent poems a heightening of dramatic and personal elements. Whereas "On the Eyes of an SS Officer" and "In a Bird Sanctuary"--two earlier poems--criticize types of public figures, "The Eye" describes a disquieting personal experience of the poet. Although the poem is partly

a criticism of such stand-offish, self-protective, and coldly connoisseurial use of the eye as one may find in Stevens' poems[,] . . . no one who has read the poem seems to have noted in it an oblique pertinence to Stevens; perhaps this is because the note of criticism on which part I concluded is directed at the speaker of the poem and not at any other persons.⁹

Wilbur finds his personal approach satisfying and appealing:

Approaching the theme through a single situation rich in physical details, and full of reactions and self-judgments, was apparently more appealing, since a poem came of it. Why more appealing? For one thing, I find it more satisfying to discover what ideas lurk in a place or event and its images, than to present my ideas as a flow of

thought with illustrative images. Furthermore, to approach a theme through a full personal experience is to increase the chances of surprise, of discovery, of finding something out. There is also, in such an approach, a greater opportunity for the dramatic, for "tone"--in this case, the tone would derive in good part from the "self-judgments" I have mentioned above.¹⁰

The poem is divided into two movements; the first gives a profusion of details seen by the speaker through a pair of binoculars, and the second offers moral commentary on the perceptions described in the first movement. The couplets of the first movement convey the light-heartedness of the speaker. In the second movement, he repents his misconduct and prays to St. Lucy for divine assistance. The unrhymed lines of varying lengths are intended to avoid "the 'smarty' quality of the first, to be graver, more direct, more openly emotional," but at the same time not "to sound falsely artless and 'sincere.'"¹¹

The details in the first movement indicate that the speaker is in an upper-class area viewing another upper-class area, "Some portion of a terrace like our own." The elevation of the place corresponds to the social status of the people who are within the range of the poet's vision. They seem to be the idle rich, who play tennis, or sunbathe, or have a "fruit-crowned tropic drink." The ship that the speaker spots has a "queenly name," carrying "Leicas, binoculars, and jewelry," luxuries for the rich. Like an eye in mid-air, the speaker is playing a game with

his perceiving power. His possible range of discovery is limited to "lewd espials" or "The nice/Discernment of a lime or lemon slice." Through a procession of trivial details, the poet manipulates his reader to ask the same questions which are on the poet's mind:

What kept me goggling all that hour? The nice
 Discernment of a lime or lemon slice?
 A hope of lewd espials? An astounded
 Sense of the import of a thing surrounded--
 Of what a Z or almond-leaf became
 Within the sudden premise of a frame?

As an eye fluttering "in the outstretched air," he is paradoxically "Giddy with godhead or with nonexistence." With his vision separated from his corporeal being, he feels that he is non-existent. Yet elevated above the world, he has an illusion of superiority and of omnipresence or omniscience. The poet purposely builds up the speaker's dilemma so that it can be resolved in the second movement.

The second movement answers the questions raised in the first. The speaker descends from the heights of wealth to the common ground of the poor. He compares his illusion of omnipresence to "the eye's nonsense" of an individual who, due to his self-flattering pride, has mistaken himself for a "curious angel." Recognizing his follies, he prays to St. Lucy for enlightenment:

Preserve us, Lucy,
 From the eye's nonsense, you by whom
 Benighted Dante was beheld,
 To whom he was beholden.

In Dante's Commedia, St. Lucy, Beatrice, and the Virgin Mary are the three heavenly ladies. Since Dante actually suffers from poor eye-sight, St. Lucy is on a special mission to protect him. During the first night in Purgatory, St. Lucy assists Dante in his spiritual ascent to God. At dawn, she bears him up to the very gate of Purgatory, where Dante beholds an angelic guardian.¹² The name of St. Lucy

signifies "light;" she was specially accredited with the power of healing weak eyes; . . . in the Comedy, the eyes of his [Dante's] that are really healed are the "eyes of the soul," intellect and will, and by the light of wisdom and the heat of charity.¹³

The poet plays on the verb "to behold." Being "beheld" by St. Lucy or bathed in the sacred light of perception, the "Benighted Dante" is redeemed from both physical darkness and spiritual blindness. He is "beholden" to her in two ways. First, he is "obliged" to her for his spiritual awakening. Second, the beholder (St. Lucy) and the beheld (Dante) are reciprocally "attached" to each other. The liaison between St. Lucy and Dante is also a union of the spiritual and the physical: physical vision is closely related to spiritual vision. (The spiritual blindness of the SS Officer, for instance, is allied to his distorted physical vision.) The two mistakes that the speaker in "The Eye" has made are his false sense of transcendence and the negation of his corporeal being. Hence he prays to St. Lucy to remind him that he is not "a curious angel" and

that he is "here in body,/A passenger, and rumped," a corporeal being like the salesman "In ugly sleep, his open mouth/Banjo-strung with spittle." Yet he wants to see the spirit which conditions the physical movements of man, not merely graceful gymnastic motions but also

. . . the strong,
Shouldering gait of the legless man,
The calm walk of the blind young woman
Whose cane touches the curbstone.

The focus of his vision has moved from the indulgences of the rich to the dignity of the unfortunate. (Wilbur's celebration of moral fortitude will be discussed fully in the fifth chapter of this thesis.) "The Eye" ends with a prayer to St. Lucy that she will instil in him a sense of communion with the entire universe:

Let me be touched
By the alien hands of love forever,
That this eye not be folly's loophole
But giver of due regard.

Wilbur's idea of love is explicit in his comments on Robert Frost's "Two Look at Two": "there is a man and a woman who look at some deer across the wall somewhere on top of the mountainside; and they feel as if something were coming back to them from nature. But of course it really is the reflection of their own love for each other."¹⁴ The "alien hands of love" are the unintelligible force which upholds and affirms a sense of brotherhood among man and of the connatural relationship between man and natural objects. As

a "giver of due regard," he pays each natural phenomenon the respect it deserves.

2. Modes of Perception

A "giver of due regard" can be defined as an observer who successfully negotiates a compromise between the scientific and the artistic approaches to the world. Wilbur uses an anecdote to illustrate the relative validity of these two ways of perceiving the world. While he was walking through Lincoln Woods with his three-year-old son one day in April, they came upon some three-inch evergreen plants. His son instinctively named them as "millows." Later a botanist at Harvard University told Wilbur that the generic name of the plant is "Lycopodium," and its vulgar name is "club-moss."¹⁵ Wilbur comments:

I refuse to concede that the name Lycopodium indicates the plant-an-sich, and that "millo" and "club-moss" are in comparison irrelevant to the object. No word touches the heart of things. The word of botany and the word of poetry each pursue a kind of truth; neither invalidates the other; and the word of poetry is rather more important because it is spoken by the whole psyche.¹⁶

Wilbur insists that science, devoid of human emotions, does not offer the absolute truth about nature. The natural world lies within "our emotional field" and "remains as always mysterious, and open to our intuitions."¹⁷

In "Thyme Flowering among Rocks" (W.S., pp. 33-35),

Wilbur explores various modes of perception. The poem progresses from a metaphorical representation of the thyme to factual descriptions and to a philosophical conclusion based on his scientific findings. Each stanza is a haiku, composed of three lines with five syllables in the first and the third lines, and seven syllables in the second line. Wilbur modifies the form by rhyming the first and the third lines of each stanza. Although each short stanza is a complete unit, the effect of the relationship between the facts may be compared to the musical distinction between staccato and legato. Wilbur connects the facts so that each image seems to merge or flow into the succeeding image, creating a legato effect.

Each of the two initial legato phrases presents a different view, subjective or objective, of the thyme. First, he approaches the thyme from an artistic point of view, most likely the sort adopted by a Japanese painter:

This, if Japanese,
Would represent grey boulders
Walloped by rough seas

So that, here or there,
The balked water tossed its froth
Straight into the air.

Yet he sees the inadequacy of such a representation through the use of metaphors. Wilbur explicitly states his position on this matter:

I think it [is] a great vice to convey everything by imagery, particularly if the imagery is not

interrelated. There ought to be areas of statement. But the statement should not equal and abolish the "objects" in the poem, as Arnold's does in "Rugby Chapel." All those rocks and cataracts gone in a puff of piety! The statement should have obliquity, and congruence to the imagery, as Marianne Moore's does--not vitiating the objects, but rather finding in them another and ideal dimension.¹⁸

Following his own advice, the poet adopts a different mode of description:

Here, where things are what
They are, it is thyme blooming,
Rocks, and nothing but--

Having, nonetheless,
Many small leaves implicit,
A green countlessness.

This way of perception is casually objective. Imprecise words, such as "many" and "countlessness" suggest the non-scientific objectivity of the speaker. This two-haiku unit describes what it literally states: the thyme is "nothing" but a flowering shrub. This unit is obviously in dialogue with Wallace Stevens' line—"time grows upon the rock"¹⁹ in The Man With the Blue Guitar--where Stevens juxtaposes the transience of the thyme and the endurance of the rock. To quote Stevens further, "Slowly the ivy on the stones/ Becomes the stones"²⁰ and "Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar."²¹ Yet "things are what/They are" if they are not "changed" by the poet's imagination. Wilbur's casually objective description of the thyme and the rocks does not allow the reader to find in the objects an "ideal

dimension."

The speaker crouches down to examine carefully the intricate structure of the flowering shrub. With microscopic precision, he describes the individual components of the thyme: its "perplexed recess," "rachitic/Branches," "Pale stems," "oblong leaves" and

A straight-ascending

Spike, whorled with fine blue
Or purple trumpets, banked in
The leaf-axils.

"Rachitic," "spike," "whorled," and "leaf-axils" are neutral terms, but they are mixed with words which indicate the narrator's subjective feelings: "perplexed" and "pale," for example. The narrator, while immersed in a process of scientific observation, tends to humanize his findings. The choice of words suggests his irresistible urge to establish a human relationship with the things of the world and to keep a balance between subjectivity and "facts." The scientific approach, unaided by a poet's intuition, is inadequate; for it has not penetrated into the mysteries of the "unfathomable thyme."

Human intuition should play an important role in man's attempt to have a fuller view of the universe, even though its mysteries are beyond the full comprehension of man. The administrators in "In a Bird Sanctuary," blinded by their insatiable desire to regulate the world around

them, will never "figure out what all's about." On the other hand, the narrator, who observes the complexity of the thyme with "due regard," perceives the paradoxical nature of reality expressed by Basho, the most celebrated master of the haiku:

The world's
A dream, Basho said,

Not because that dream's
A falsehood, but because it's
Truer than it seems.

Basho's dream philosophy is best illustrated by his occasional poem to Doi, a friend who had given him a writing brush:

You are the butterfly
And I the dreaming heart
Of Chuang-tzu²²

Basho's poem is indebted to Chuang-tzu, a Chinese Taoist, who once dreamt that he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he wondered whether he was indeed Chuang-tzu who had dreamed that he was a butterfly or whether he was indeed a butterfly dreaming that he was Chuang-tzu. The idea behind this parable is "sangha"--the "fellowship of all beings"²³:

While Chuang-tzu was playing with interpenetration and transformation of all things, but specifically himself and a butterfly, Bashō was playing with his friend, personalizing the sangha.²⁴

This idea of interpenetration parallels Stevens' when he says, "Slowly the ivy on the stones/Becomes the stones." Transience and permanence seem inseparable, as all beings

interpenetrate one another. Dream is an unfathomable dimension of truth rather than an opposite of it. The concluding stanza of "Thyme Flowering among Rocks" thus becomes an epigram which sums up the relativity of truth and falsehood, facts and feelings, an idea which has been carefully developed throughout the poem.

Wilbur continues to negotiate a compromise between human intuition and scientific findings in the poem "The Fourth of July" (M.R., pp. 20-21). The dedication to I.A. R[ichards] suggests the concern of the poem, one that was also a principal concern of Richards: the possible relatedness between mental and physical reality. "The Fourth of July" is evenly divided into five numbered stanzas, each presenting an anecdote, biographical or literary, which is related to the various modes of perception. The life-giving sun, the governing force of the world of phenomena, shines on all vital forms of existence. But the scheming human mind, sometimes shaded from the sun, pursues dreams of its own. The two main objectives of the poem are to test, first, the degree of conversancy between dream and facts, and, second, the relative accuracy of intuitive and scientific ways of perceiving the phenomenal world.

The genesis of Alice in Wonderland,²⁵ described in the first stanza, involves two basic modes of perception,

artistic and scientific. The journey on July 4, 1862 "from Folly Bridge to Godstow" parallels the departure from the world of linguistic and mathematical sciences to the world of artistic adventures. "Liddell, the Oxford lexicographer," puts his exactness in abeyance and lets his daughters venture into "That universe of which he [Lewis Carroll] sipped and told." And Dodgson, the mathematician, "Mocking all grammars, codes, and theorems," shares his "golden fantasy" with the Liddell girls. The paradoxes "golden fantasy" and "fool's gold," suggest that the tale is a composite of the reality of the sun and human imagination, truth and fiction. The dual nature of the tale is expressed by "the spangled, blindly flowing Thames," which reflects physically the sun and manifests intuitively the hidden natural force. Carroll-Dodgson, as is suggested by the pseudo and real names, has a dual identity: he is both a mathematician and a tale-teller. This duality merges in the fantasy world of Alice. With a logical and disciplined mind, he tests the limitation of logic. The world of Alice's adventures is "mad" because it is counter-rational, its validity not having been analyzed and proven. The question is whether her experiences in dreamland are truer than they seem.

The second stanza telescopes two fourth-of-July's together, the first being the same date and year when

Lewis Carroll journeyed with the Liddell girls to Godstow. On this day, General Grant in Memphis "chewed through scheme on scheme/For toppling Vicksburg like a house of cards." The house of cards marks the end of Alice in Wonderland as she in her dream realizes that the royalties and their attendants are only a deck of cards. This allusion to Carroll's tale indicates the poet's doubt concerning the congruence between the plan of the human mind and the execution of the plan.

Pondering the interplay of human imagination and naked reality, the poet in the third stanza states: "The sun is not a concept but a star," meaning that the life-giving force is not a mental reality but a physical reality. Yet to comprehend the hidden ultimate order behind physical appearances demands human intuition. Therefore he asks:

What if its [the sun's] rays were once conjointly
blurred
By tea-fumes and a general's cigar?
Though, as for that, what grand arcanum saves
Appearances, what word
Holds all from foundering in points and waves?

"Points" and "waves" probably refer to the scientific analysis of light. Science relates light to waves of motion and the flow of particles. Yet our perception or impression of light is quite different from what science tells us. The appearance of light is quite far from its real self. Wilbur wonders what is the magic word that bridges these discrepancies.

The second half of the poem shows the congruence or incongruity between reality and certain human ideals or dreams: the Wonderland imagined by Carroll, systematic schemes of the universe devised by scientists, and universal brotherhood dreamt by the Americans. Carroll's "termless wood," though shaded from the sun, tells a universal truth:

No doubt the fairest game
Play only in those groves where creatures are
At one, distinct, and innocent of name,
As Alice found, who in the termless wood
Lacked words to thank the shade in which she stood.

In the "termless wood," Alice has forgotten her personal name (Alice) and her generic name (human being). The trees and the fawn that she encounters are also nameless. Yet this image of the "grand arcanum," the wood is what makes possible the communion of man and animal. Walking through the "termless wood," the fawn lets Alice lovingly clasp its soft neck. But as soon as they emerge from the wood, the fawn, suddenly remembering its name and its distinction from the human species, darts away at full speed. It identifies Alice as a "human child."²⁶ Human beings hunt deer, and thus she is its enemy. Elizabeth Sewell suggests: "the loss of language brings with it an increase in loving unity with living things. It is words that separate the fawn and the child."²⁷ In the "fairest game," the hunter and the hunted are inseparable, for they are in "loving unity."

The word "Nevertheless" which begins the fourth stanza implies that, despite the pitfalls of naming, the poet sees its importance. In "Poetry and the Landscape," Wilbur himself maintains that anonymity is a source of horror and that the "act of naming is the essential poetic act":

Man clings to language, Francis Ponge has said, as tightly as the oyster to his shell. What more terrifying thing could the witches in Macbeth be doing, than

A deed without a name?²⁸

In "The Poet"--an earlier treatise on a similar subject--Emerson maintains that the poet "gives [a] name to whatever he beholds, and the name clings thenceforward."²⁹ Through naming, man gains his symbolic mastery over animate and inanimate objects in the natural world. But Wilbur's concern is with the appropriate way of labelling the objects. Carolus Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist, seemed to have formulated a feasible system to define genera and species and to name plants and animals. He embodies a coalition of both scientific and emotional approaches to nature. His "love of all things" calls him to the world of objects: "Bird, beast, fish, plant, and stone." The words "bitterly" and "sweet" suggest his emotional involvement in his scientific classification and selective arrangements. When apoplexy destroys his mind, he forgets all the botanical names

he has devised; and in this way his relationship to the natural world ends. His "swoon" is "no kindly" one because it separates the lover from the world he loves.

The poet comments on another approach to the world:

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

In contrast to Linnaeus, who was obsessed with the task of classification, Copernicus is praised for his "fire-fledged knowledge" which, as Wilbur told Charles Wallis Darling in a conversation, "is the knowledge 'of the angels.'"³⁰ Divine knowledge can be accommodated only beneath a "hospitable roof," a human mind which is not over-analytical but is content with "hunch" (intuition) and "gaiety" (affirmation). The poet also praises Copernicus, whose

. . . vision leapt into the solar disc
And set the earth to wheeling, waited then
To see what slate or quadrant might exact,
Not hesitant to risk
His dream-stuff in the fitting-rooms of fact . . .

Copernicus challenged the validity of the Ptolemaic theory that the earth was the center of the universe and tested his "dream stuff," the heliocentric hypothesis, against the observed data. Copernicus is thus a liaison between the real and the dream worlds. Likewise, Alice constantly compares her adventures and newly gained knowledge in the

dreamland with what she remembers of the real world.

The poem ends with Wilbur challenging the Americans to see if their ideal and reality conform to each other. He wonders if the Americans, "after troubled sleep, debates,/Great bloodshed, and a century's delay," have realized "what once [they] said upon this day." What the Americans "said" upon July 4 may allude both to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the "terms" made beside a stunted oak tree in 1863 when the Lieutenant-General John C. Pemberton of the Confederate forces surrendered to the Union Army under the command of Major-General Ulysses Grant. Although the "terms" are not directly related to the abolition of slavery, the battle was fought in the name of human rights. The final statement is a tribute to the States which have turned the American dream of equality into a reality: these states "come to see that black men too are men." Their eyes, thus, are not so blinded by color as to become "folly's loophole"; instead, they have learned to be "givers of due regard."

3. The Kaleidoscopic World

Wilbur often explores solutions to the apparent conflict between human dream and physical reality. Vision--sensory and transcendental--seems to be the solution. Sensory vision enables man to see an object as it appears

to be. And transcendental vision helps him to step imaginatively from the tangible world of commonplace appearances to the intangible world of wonders. The poet in "Digging for China" reflects a childhood experience in New Jersey: he dug for China, where "Nothing looks the same." This incident recalls Thoreau looking "at the bottom of Walden Pond through blue ice, and . . . for a sight of the bottom of a neighboring well."³¹ Both Wilbur and Thoreau search for the unknown via the known. This relation between human vision and the world of phenomena is a recurring concern in Wilbur's poetry and has a central place even in his earliest poems; "Objects" and "The Beautiful Changes," for example.

"Digging for China" (T.T.W., p. 28) is undoubtedly in dialogue with Thoreau's parable of a certain individual, who in the course of digging for China, loses the world. This parable is prescribed as a remedy for man's vanity, his tendency to commemorate himself in monuments. "As for your high towers and monuments," Thoreau writes in "Economy," "there was a crazy fellow once in this town who undertook to dig through to China, and he got so far that, as he said, he heard the Chinese pots and kettles rattle." Thoreau ends the story on a note of disapproval: "I think that I shall not go out of my way to admire the hole which he made."³² Whereas Thoreau only sees the hole as a

worthless monument,³³ Wilbur explores the implications of digging it.

"Digging" suggests that the boy's task is a quest and that he wants to go beyond the appearances of physical objects for a "second finding" ("The Beautiful Changes," B.C., p. 54). The chance of his discovery of "the buried strangeness/Which nourishes the known" ("A Hole in the Floor," A.P., p. 22) depends on his faith and his luck: he is "Down on my hands and knees. It was a sort/Of praying, I suspect." He goes through an archetypal journey from light to darkness and back to light again. Upon re-emergence from the hole he is digging, the boy perceives in the familiar objects a new wonder:

Before the dream could weary of itself
My eyes were tired of looking into darkness,
My sunbaked head of hanging down a hole.
I stood up in a place I had forgotten,
Blinking and staggering while the earth went round
And showed me silver barns, the fields dozing
In palls of brightness, patens growing and gone
In the tides of leaves, and the whole sky china blue.
Until I got my balance back again
All that I saw was China, China, China.

The boy has completed the three stages of a journey: departure, transformation, and return. His return to the familiar world after his experience in the world of hidden strangeness is symbolic of a union between the worlds of dream and reality. He has discovered a new country in the old, China-New Jersey, a composite of imagination and observation. To adopt José Ortega y

Gasset's terms, the boy's concentration on digging has left him with eyes that are "well-open" and thus "ever-dazzled"; eyes to which "everything in the world is strange and marvellous."

"Objects" (B.C., pp. 23-24) is one of Wilbur's major statements on the interplay between imagination and reality. Except for the fourth stanza, each stanza runs onto the one that follows it, a pattern which gives a sense of continuity to the various objects, different from but analogous to each other. Within this symmetrical pattern, Wilbur juxtaposes several quests, mythic, intuitive, and artistic, against one another. The arguments, systematically arranged and logically developed, can be divided into four sections, after the fashion of the Aristotelian system: exordium, exposition, argumentation, and conclusion.³⁴

In the exordium, the poet states his thesis: his mistrust of standardized, arbitrary abstractions:

"Meridians are a net/Which catches nothing." In "On My Own Work," Wilbur points out: "What poetry does with ideas is to redeem them from abstraction and submerge them in sensibility; it embodies them in persons and things and surrounds them with a weather of feeling."³⁵ Like a net, the meridians compose meshes through which the uniqueness of real objects slips in all directions.

suggests de Hooch's religious reverence for the sacredness of objects. "Intransitive" is a grammatical term--an intransitive verb is one which makes equivalents. His eye, being "intransitive," registers what it sees without deranging the objects. And the act of painting arrests the reality--perceived by his "devout intransitive eye"--which otherwise cannot "desist from tacit, tragic/Fading away." Thus, Pieter de Hooch's art is both a faithful and magical representation of the real:

. . . A quick
Change of the eye and all this calmly passes
Into a day, into magic.

Objects are not the end but the path to the enchanted garden, for which artists and questers alike search.

In conclusion, the poet describes his own artistic quest, his "voyage," which is a parallel to Hanno's journey. The artist, in order to reach the state of transcendence in which he might perceive the hidden, magical aspects of reality, has to submerge himself first in the abundance of physical objects. Objects may be imperfect and impermanent, "maculate, cracked, askew,/Gay-pocked and potsherd," yet only in the tangible tree" can the poet see "afloat among the leaves, all calm and curled,/The Cheshire smile." The "Cheshire smile," taken from Alice in Wonderland, alludes

to the cat's grin which remains when the rest of the cat fades away:

" . . . I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly; you make one quite giddy!"
[Alice said.]

"All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"³⁶

"A grin without a cat" is a paradox; the grin represents form which is independent of substance (the cat). The "Cheshire smile" in Alice's dreamland refers to the mysterious dimension of reality which is beyond our sensual perception, but for which sensual perception must provide the necessary threshold. Dreams, as Basho writes, are truer than the truth in the waking life. Yet, dreams may lead the poet too far away from the world of objects. Thus the poet feels "fearfully free" in his artistic adventure, trying to arrive at a balance between inner and outer realities, between the waking and the dreaming life. Moreover, he has to choose an appropriate language to enable the objects to speak, and every choice involves a risk.

"The Beautiful Changes" (B.C., p. 54) is a poem on poetic composition--an artist's choice of an appropriate language to depict the kaleidoscopic phenomena. The

Beautiful changes in two ways. First, man's attempt to perpetuate a beautiful sight at a certain time changes the uniqueness of a particular object. This attempt is illusory, because natural beauty is not static but subject to change. Second, the qualities of the objects are not absolute in themselves. They are evasive and mutable, depending on time and place. In this poem, objects are described as they are perceived by the human eye and as they are related to other objects.

The poem progresses from various illustrative examples to a conclusive commentary, an arrangement frequently employed by Wilbur in this volume. In the first two stanzas, Wilbur uses a series of similes, delicate in tone and picturesque in detail, to portray the relation between an object and other objects and the relation between poetic imagination and the physical world. The Beautiful inspires the poet to think metaphorically, and his excited imagination changes the scenes so that they become richer in tone and texture. First, he compares Queen Anne's Lace on a fall meadow to lilies lying on water. This version of reality depends on the viewer and on his perception of plausible analogies. In this case, the viewer is a walker, "wading a Fall meadow," and his skin is sensitive to the lacy texture of the wild flowers. The second simile depicts his love, another example of the Beautiful. The

word "love" is so frequently and thoughtlessly used that it has degenerated into a cliché. The poet's simile gives special, definite features to his love, individualizes it, and renders it discernible to the reader: "the slightest shade of you/Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes." The second stanza develops the idea that the qualities of objects are not absolute and that some of these essences are only perceptible in relation to their surrounding objects:

The beautiful changes as a forest is changed
By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;
As a mantis, arranged
On a green leaf, grows
Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves
Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows.

The kaleidoscopic world appears to have been designed by an Artist, who has perfected a harmonious blending of colors and arrangement of individual sights and objects. Each object has its own signature, yet its significance is of greater importance and intensity in relation to the whole.

The third stanza is a juxtaposition of two beautiful sights: the roses and the girl. The way the girl holds the roses is an artistic composition. Wilbur may have in mind William Carlos Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," which also emphasizes the spatial relationship between red and white objects. Williams places the red wheelbarrow, glazed with rain water, beside the white

chickens. "So much depends/upon," as Dr. Williams would say, how the girl holds the roses, who is looking at the sight, what time of the day it is, and other similar factors. The change in the last stanza is two-fold. First, the girl holding the roses is a synthesis of two beautiful entities to create a new wonder. Second, this change also involves a liaison between human imagination and the girl-rose composition. Wilbur maintains that

. . . the beautiful changes
 In such kind ways,
 Wishing ever to sunder
 Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
 For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

"Kind" means "natural" and "benevolent" in this context. It is natural and benevolent for the beautiful to change and be changed by other natural objects with which it has a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. The artist's role is to see things as separate entities and in relation to other objects. The beautiful changes are benevolent for they sharpen an artist's awareness of the "greenness" which "is deeper than anyone knows"--the mystery hidden behind phenomenal appearances; the Cheshire cat's grin.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹The epigraph to this chapter is cited under "The Owl" in A Bestiary, compiled by Richard Wilbur and illustrated by Alexander Calder (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), p. 20.

²Richard Wilbur, "The Genie in the Bottle", in Mid-Century American Poets, ed. John Ciardi (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1950), p. 7.

³Part I of "The Art of Poetry: Two Interviews with Richard Wilbur", ed. Peter Stitt, Paris Review, No. 72 (Winter 1977), 72.

⁴The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 27.

⁵Ibid., p. 36.

⁶Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 153.

⁷Richard Wilbur, Essay on "The Eye", in Fifty Contemporary Poets: the Creative Process, ed. Alberta Turner (New York: Longman Inc., 1977), p. 336. This article is a letter dated April 19, 1975 and addressed to Alberta Turner.

⁸Ibid., p. 335.

⁹Ibid., p. 336.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 335.

¹¹Ibid., p. 336.

¹²See Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio ix, ll. 49-78.

¹³Jefferson B. Fletcher, Symbolism of the Divine Comedy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1921), pp. 176-177.

¹⁴See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard

Wilbur", p. 215.

¹⁵See Kepes, p. 86.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁸See Ciardi, p. 6.

¹⁹The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 171.

²⁰Ibid., p. 170.

²¹Ibid., p. 165.

²²Cited in Robert Aitken, A Zen Wave: Bashō's Haiku and Zen (New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1978), p. 125.

²³Ibid., p. 176.

²⁴Aitken, p. 127.

²⁵Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, The Diaries of Lewis Carroll, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1971), I, 181-182. On July 4, 1862, Dodgson entered the following in his diary: "July 4. . . . Duckworth and I made an expedition up the river to Godstow with the three Liddells: we had tea on the bank there, and did not reach Christ Church again till quarter past eight, when we took them on to my rooms to see my collection of micro-photographs, and restored them to the Deanery just before nine. [On the opposite page Dodgson added on Feb. 10, 1863,]: On which occasion I told them the fairy-tale of Alice's Adventures Underground, which I undertook to write out for Alice, and which is now finished (as to the text) though the pictures are not yet nearly done." The note within square brackets is inserted by the editor.

²⁶Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland, ed. Donald Gray (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1971), p. 137.

²⁷Elizabeth Sewall, The Field of Nonsense (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), p. 128.

²⁸See Kepes, p. 86.

²⁹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet", The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Robert E. Spiller and E. Williams (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), III, 356.

³⁰Charles Wallis Darling, "'Giver of Due Regard': The Poetry of Richard Wilbur", Ph. D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1977, p. 96n.

³¹George Monteiro, "Redemption Through Nature: a Recurring Theme in Thoreau, Frost and Richard Wilbur", American Quarterly, XX (Winter 1968), 807.

³²Henry David Thoreau, "Economy" in Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 39.

³³Monteiro, p. 808.

³⁴Aristotle, The "Art" of Rhetoric, trans. John Henry Freese (London: William Heinemann, 1926), pp. 427-471.

³⁵"On My Own Work," Responses, p. 126.

³⁶Carroll, p, 53.

CHAPTER III

THE CORPOREAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

I prefer not to situate the beautiful and the spiritual at a vague distance. I prefer William Blake's classical eye. I think of William Blake as a classicist in this sense. He can see all the spiritual truth he needs to see in the sand-grain near at hand, and in the other immediate properties of his world.

--Richard Wilbur, an interview by
R. Frank and S. Mitchell

As I have attempted to show in the preceding chapter, Wilbur observes the kaleidoscopic world with "well-open eyes" and approaches the intangible dimension of a real object through its tangible appearance. He complains of Edgar Allan Poe that Poe's "sole present recourse is to repudiate all human and mundane subject-matter, all 'dull realities,' and to pursue visions of those realms in which beauty was or is inviolate."¹ Similarly, Wilbur in "The Waters" (B.C., p. 32) criticizes

. . . the pauper poet who dreamed
Of sunken rivers, yet who scorned to seek
Their sources in the caves of the world . . .

Wilbur denounces Poe's "destructive transcendence"² and

accuses him of hopelessly narrowing "the scope and function of art" to the "subject-matter at the flickering end of dreams."³ Poe's imagination or, more precisely, fantasy, "must approach the ideal, not merely through the real, but by the negation of the real."⁴ Poe substitutes fantasy for imagination, but Wilbur, as Coleridge does in Biographia Literaria, distinguishes one from the other.⁵ Wilbur states:

To me, the imagination is a faculty which fuses things, takes hold of the physical and ideal worlds and makes them one, provisionally. Fantasy, in my mind, is a poetic or artistic activity which leaves something out--it ignores the concrete and the actual in order to create a purely abstract, unreal realm.⁶

The view that transcendental reality is superior to physical reality originated from the Platonic concept that the body is a prison of the spirit. To fulfil his God-like potentialities, man has to release the spirit from its corporeal manifestations. Wilbur, by contrast, does not exalt a disembodied soul. Although he is romantically inclined to believe in an otherworldly existence, as for example in "La Rose des Vents," he also celebrates the life-giving sun--the presiding deity of the time-bound world. He cherishes the spiritual within the physical and an interchange between these two opposites. The Incarnation, with which God (spirit) is made flesh (corporeal), becomes a consistent symbol of the ideal balance between

these two polarities. Yet this ideal is a miracle which man prays for but can never fully achieve.

The rivalry between spiritual yearnings and a commitment to the imperfect world of objects motivates a large number of Wilbur's poems--"A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra," "Grasse: the Olive Trees," "La Rose des Vents," "Two Voices in a Meadow," "The Aspen and the Stream," "Sunlight Is Imagination," "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness," and "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World." With reference to "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra," "Two Voices in a Meadow," and "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," Wilbur writes:

The three poems . . . all have to do (a critic might say) with the proper relation between the tangible world and the intuitions of the spirit. The poems assume that such intuitions are, or may be, true; they incline, however, to favor a spirituality that is not abstracted, not dissociated and world-renouncing. A good part of my work could, I suppose, be understood as a public quarrel with the aesthetics of Edgar Allan Poe.⁷

Wilbur's quarrel with Poe is counterbalanced by his affinity with Emily Dickinson, who keenly appreciates the physical world around her. If Poe's aesthetic transcendence is destructive, Dickinson's is constructive:

The creature of appetite (whether insect or human) pursues satisfaction, and strives to possess the object in itself; it cannot imagine the vaster economy of desire, in which the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object is spiritually possessed, not merely for

itself, but more truly as an index of the All. That is how one comprehends a nectar. Miss Dickinson's bee does not comprehend the rose which it plunders, because the truer sweetness of the rose lies beyond the rose, in its relationship to the whole being; but she would say that Gerard Manley Hopkins comprehends a bluebell when, having noticed its intrinsic beauties, he adds, "I know the beauty of Our Lord by it."⁸

Wilbur shares Emily Dickinson's and Hopkins' attitudes towards spiritual transcendence. To comprehend His creation is to comprehend the Creator. Wilbur's position is: "spirit is not other-worldly, but world-seeing and world-transforming":

I'm more interested in this world than any other; and at the same time I think that if you are going to affirm something that is out of fashion (and religion is more or less out of fashion), a good strategy maybe is to approach it in a challenging and critical way rather than simply to recommend it. I think a lot of my poems, instead of saying "isn't this a marvellous world permeated by divinity," say instead "come on, let's not to be too spiritual, let's get down to earth." That of course implies the possibility of being spiritual. That kind of attack on a too unworldly spirituality could be seen as a way of affirming the possibility of any kind of spirituality.⁹

The structure of many of Wilbur's poems is dialectical, corresponding to the rival claims of the two conflicting worlds: the actual and the ideal. His dialectics usually take the form of a succession of examples through which the poet examines the complexities involved in the conflict. The arrangement of the arguments is usually a juxtaposition of the thesis against the anti-thesis. Sometimes this is followed by a synthesis, which may

be a poetic resolution ("difficult balance" in "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World"), or a paradoxical image ("light incarnate" in "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness"). A Biblical reference (Noah's dove with the olive branch in "Grasse: the Olive Trees") or a religious allusion (St. Francis in "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra") may have the same effect of concluding the argument. Sometimes the contention between the argument and the counter-argument is inconclusive, as in "Two Voices in a Meadow" and "La Rose des Vents." The dialectical format of ideas in Wilbur's poems can be divided into three categories: polarities and counterpoint, dialogues, and narratives of dilemma.

1. Polarities and Counterpoint

Wilbur tends to juxtapose one character or object against another, balancing each against its "counterpoint." The opposed images show the inadequacy of one divorced from the other. Even in his book of word-games for children, Opposites, Wilbur speculates about the relativity between objects, or between ideas, or between objects and ideas. Through contrasts, Wilbur in his poems explores the relatedness of two conflicting inclinations: spiritual aspirations and mundane commitments.

The two fountains in "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the

Villa Sciarra" (T.T.W., pp. 43-45), according to Wilbur, represent two different views of happiness--participation in worldly pleasures and transcendence towards heavenly bliss:

I portray a wall-fountain in one of the public gardens of Rome, and then proceed across town to describe the celebrated fountains in St. Peter's Square. At the same time the poem presents, by way of its contrasting fountains, a clash between the ideas of pleasure and joy, of acceptance and transcendence.¹⁰

The ornate Baroque wall-fountain, meticulously described in the first seven stanzas, is a scene of fallen Eden, of "saecular ecstasy." A stone cherub wears a bronze crown which is too big for its head. "A serpent has begun to eat" the cherub's feet. The water trickles down over the three shells in "effortless descent." The descent is "effortless," for it is in harmony with the natural law of gravity. Beneath the third scalloped shell inhabit "a faun-ménage and their familiar goose." The presence of a serpent and the descent of water recall the "fortunate fall" of Adam into the world of experience. The faun, expressing a possible view of happiness, accepts his condition with ease:

The stocky god upholds the shell with ease,
Watching, about his shaggy knees,
The goatish innocence of his babes at play.

The faun's "babes" are heirs to their parents' attitude towards life. The happiness of the faun-ménage consists

in their total acceptance and enjoyment of what they are allowed. Sensuous delights are conveyed throughout the description of the wall-fountain: the water is "sweet," the flesh of the "fauness" is "sparkling," and the "ripple-shadows" are "More addling to the eye than wine."

Trickling down through the seven stanzas, the lengthy sentences imitate the downward movement of water from the stone cherub to the "trefoil pool," where "ripple-shadows come/And go in swift reticulum." Certain words are strategically placed at the beginning of a line to heighten the intensity of the fall or movement of the water:

Happy in all that ragged, loose
Collapse of water, its effortless descent

And flatteries of spray,
The stocky god upholds the shell with ease . . .

The word "collapse" sends the water, sustained by the adjective "loose" in the preceding run-on line, plunging downwards at full speed. And the phrase "flatteries of spray" is a kinetic and graphic description of the water after "its effortless descent." The language suggests the dance of light and shadow associated with the music and patterns of splashing water.

Juxtaposed against the elaborate wall-fountain, are the plain Maderna fountains. Compared with the

wall-fountain, they are less intricate in design but more intricate in their expression of human ideals:

. . . the main jet
Struggling aloft until it seems at rest

In the act of rising, until
The very wish of water is reversed,
That heaviness borne up to burst
In a clear, high, cavorting head, to fill

With blaze, and then in gauze
Delays, in a gnatlike shimmering, in a fine
Illumined version of itself, decline,
And patter on the stones its own applause?

The description of the Maderna fountains is written in one sentence, manifesting the effort which sustains the upward movement of the water in defiance of the natural law of gravity. Again Wilbur captures the kinetic motion of the water, "struggling" and balancing itself "aloft until it seems at rest/In the act of rising." Yet the world-renouncing struggle of the Maderna fountains towards spirituality seems to be undistinguishable from the desire for personal glamour. The words "cavorting" and "display" imply that the ascent itself is a showy performance, which is applauded by the descent of the water, pattering "on the stones." The water of the main jet is only "at rest" after a glimpse of heaven and after self-glorification, whereas the fauns "are at rest in fulness of desire/For what is given."

The poet wonders whether men should model their lives on the "water-saints" who "display the pattern of our

areté" or the "showered fauns" who

. . . do not tire
Of the smart of the sun, the pleasant water-douse

And riddled pool below,
Reproving our disgust and our ennui
With humble insatiety.

It is through the example of St. Francis that the poet suggests a subtle, ambiguous resolution for the dilemma between the two human tendencies: restless spiritual yearning and "humble insatiety." Although St. Francis thrived on abstinence from worldly pleasures, he might be enlightened by seeing the virtue of the fauns: their humbleness. The virtue of humility, according to the Saint, can be the key to celestial riches. Yet this revelation that the Saint might have experienced is only a possibility, and the "bliss" he "might have seen" only a "shade." Unlike the fauns, who have fulfilled God's command to multiply, St. Francis at Sarteano scourged his recalcitrant body because of his desire for a family:

Francis rushed out naked into the snow and set to make seven snow heaps. Then in his southern fashion he turned upon himself, exclaiming: "That large heap is thy wife, those four are thy two sons and two daughters, the other two are thy manservant and maidservant. Make haste to clothe them all for they are dying of cold." Thus he continued to make mockery bravely of his temptation, until starved with the bitter cold, he retorted upon himself: "If the care of them thus troubles thee, betake thyself to serve God only."¹¹

But St. Francis differs also from the water-saints in

their longing for sainthood. Their struggle is tinted by a desire for secular applause, but St. Francis believes that perfect joy consists in humility and acceptance. When Friar Leo asked him what perfect joy was, St. Francis answered:

when we knock at the door, the doorkeeper cometh in a rage and . . . openeth not to us, and maketh us stay outside hungry and cold all night in the rain and snow; then if we endure patiently such cruelty, such abuse, and such insolent dismissal without complaint or murmuring, and believe humbly and charitably that the doorkeeper truly knows us, and that God maketh him to rail against us; O Friar Leo, . . . there is perfect joy.¹²

St. Francis, who provides an ironic parallel to both the water-saints and the fauns, might have achieved a balance between the two sets of virtues: the fauns' humility and the water-saints' aspiration towards transcendence. Yet the achievement of this balance would have been contingent upon his respect for and acceptance of

That land of tolerable flowers, that state

As near and far as grass
Where eyes become the sunlight, and the hand
Is worthy of water: the dreamt land
Toward which all hungers leap, all pleasures pass.

The word "flowers" in this context recalls the title of the book, The Little Flowers of St. Francis. Flowers ordinarily are emblems of the short duration of existence, but these flowers are "tolerable" because they are perceived as enduring. In St. Francis' case the flowers are his

virtues and his this-worldly religious accomplishments. The "eyes" or lights of the soul "become the sunlight" or the life-giving force. And the "hand," meaning physical labor in general and the flower-tender in particular, "Is worthy of water," which is associated with both baptism and irrigation. The "tolerable flowers" (immortal mortality) are nourished by the lights of the soul and of the sun and by water from both spiritual and physical sources. In this "dreamt land/Toward which all hungers leap, and pleasures pass," spirituality is world-nourishing rather than world-renouncing.

In "Grasse: the Olive Trees" (C., p. 25), the poet philosophizes as he observes a landscape "Of heat and juice" in Grasse, an old town in Southern France. The luxuriance of vegetation represents the opulent earth of the here and now. Expressions such as "luxury," "wealth," and "golden day," depict the splendor of summer. Yet a sense of stagnation accompanies this display of abundance: still water "Lies on the rain-pocked rocks like yellow wool," "Flower smells/Are set in the golden day," and "Whatever moves moves with the slow complete/Gestures of statuary." Summer is "a rich and crowded calm": though affluent, it is overloaded with "a heavy jammed excess." The "rusty bright" soil, "wealth of water," and the "grass" which "Mashes under the foot" are too weighty

to stimulate any romantic musing or desire for transcendence.

The olives, "Like clouds of doubt against the earth's array," are intruders in this hot and wet landscape in Grasse. Being "Unearthly pale" and showing "A hue of far away," they demonstrate their aspiration towards an other-worldly existence:

Their faint disheveled foliage divests
The sunlight of its color and its sway.

Not that the olive spurns the sun; its leaves
Scatter and point to every part of the sky,
Like famished fingers waving. Brilliance weaves
And sombers down among them, and among
The anxious silver branches, down to the dry
And twisted trunk, by rooted hunger wrung.

The olive is not world-renouncing, but its spiritual yearnings are not satisfied by the sun.

Wilbur's description of the olive is distinctly reminiscent of William Blake's "Ah, Sunflower."¹³ The sunflower, "weary of time," seeks after the timeless, "golden" sphere of the sun--a stasis--where there is neither quest nor journey and where both "the youth pined away with desire" and "the pale virgin shrouded in snow" will find fulfillment. The olive in its endless quest for a realm of splendor, pines away its life with desire, like Blake's "youth"; and becomes "Unearthly pale," like Blake's "pale virgin." Although the olive--like the sunflower--turns its head heavenwards, it is also rooted on earth and will never be free of its earthbound limitations.

Wilbur's choice of the olive tree as a symbol of spiritual aspiration, like Blake's choice of the sunflower, is appropriate. The olive branch is a sign of peace. The tree appears frequently in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, and usually represents God's blessings or spiritual beauty. For example, in Deuteronomy 8:8, the olive tree is one of the blessings of the Promised Land:

A land of wheat, and barley, of vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive trees and honey.

In Hosea 14:6, the prophet predicts:

his [Israel's] beauty shall be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.

Wilbur specifically refers to Genesis 8:11 in the concluding stanza:

Even when seen from near, the olive shows
A hue of far away. Perhaps for this
The dove brought olive back, a tree which grows
Unearthly pale, which ever dims and dries,
And whose great thirst, exceeding all excess,
Teaches the South it is not paradise.

The word "Perhaps" conveys Wilbur's non-committal disposition. On the one hand, he recognizes the inadequacy of the time-bound world and that "the South . . . is not paradise." On the other hand, the olive tree, thirsting for an unearthly paradise, "ever dims and dries," as Ponce de Leon's romantic quest for eternal youth in "Sunlight Is Imagination" turns Florida into a desert.

(See below, p. 122.) This unresolved dilemma is the very essence of "Grasse: the Olive Trees" and even of Wilbur's poetry as a whole. Two critics, Donald Hill and A. K. Weatherhead, think that Wilbur takes a definite position in the poem. According to Hill, "[t]he olive suffers from romantic incompleteness, from a yearning that makes it unfit for this world."¹⁴ Weatherhead's observations contradict those of Hill:

the olive, with features and associations of movement, hunger, aridity, and doubt, provides relief from the wet, static satiety of the landscape of Southern France.¹⁵

Both Hill and Weatherhead have oversimplified the poet's dilemma. The olive trees express Wilbur's awareness of man's frustrations with his timebound and earthbound state, as in "Sunlight Is Imagination" and "Ballade for the Duke of Orléans." Yet the poet hesitates to renounce the opulent earth. The poem, in fact, is a debate rather than a moral statement, and the poet does not offer a clear-cut resolution.

2. Dialogues

The argument involved in Wilbur's dialogue poems belongs to the tradition of the dualistic metaphysics of Platonism--the contention between the soul and the body--a tradition also exemplified in well-known poems by

Andrew Marvell and W. B. Yeats.¹⁶ Unlike Plato, Wilbur does not intrude into the conversation or offer any committed judgment or commentary. Wilbur's dialogues might be classified as Socratic instead; for they usually take the form of an open argument. Wilbur has the two rivals, in the process of contradicting each other's philosophical positions, clarify the paradoxes of the human condition.

"La Rose des Vents" (C., p. 8) is Wilbur's first attempt to dramatize two conflicting impulses within himself: his fear of mortality and his love for the time-bound world in spite of its mutability. He desires spiritual transcendence but hesitates to forsake the earth. This dilemma is presented as a dialogue between a poet and his lady. Frightened by the disintegrative forces, he sees the importance of ascending to an elevated sphere of existence which is not affected by the passage of time:

The hardest headlands
Gravel down,
The seas abrade
What coasts we know,
And all our maps
In azure drown,
Forewarning us
To rise and go.

The poet wants to "dwell/On the rose of the winds," an imaginary "isle" which is beyond the erosive power of the sea. "The rose of the winds" or the "compass-rose"¹⁷

is an ornate figure on an old compass. He follows the guidance of his own imagination in the hope of finding salvation in an other-worldly realm.

The lady, who prefers to live in the here and now, rejects the poet's proposal to "rise and go":

That roving wave
Where Venus rose
Glints in the floods
Of farthest thought;
What beauty there
In image goes
Dissolves in other
And is not.

Venus, who embodies perfect beauty and eternal youth, is a figment of the human imagination. The words "glint," "farthest," and "dissolve" suggest the faintness, remoteness, and short duration of such a vision of beauty. The lady prefers what is tangible. Earth, according to her, has mysteries of its own, still waiting to be explored:

There are some shores
Still left to find
Whose broken rocks
Will last the hour . . .

She refutes the poet's tendency to negate the reality of matter in favor of metaphysical reality:

Forsake those roses
Of the mind
And tend the true,
The mortal flower.

Whereas the poet wants to immortalize mortality, the lady is determined to accept mutability as inescapable. For her,

the beauty of the "compass-rose" and of Venus is only an artistic imitation of the "mortal flower." The lady's speech projects her disdainful attitude towards the whimsicality of creative endeavors. "The mortal flower" refers to both the mutability of human life in general and the transience of her beauty in particular. She pleads with the poet to accept the fact that she, unlike Venus, will grow old. The word "true," which describes the "mortal flower," means "faithful" in the moral sense and "real" in the empirical sense. Wilbur puns on the same word--"true"--in "Epistemology II":

We milk the cow of the world, and as we do
We whisper in her ear, "You are not true."
(C., p. 9)

We tend to neglect the reality of matter in favor of metaphysical or spiritual reality. The lady in "La Rose des Vents" wants to dissuade the poet from denying her mortal beauty and from transforming it into an immortal, but imagined reality. Wilbur often seems inclined to let characters who are dedicated to the imperfect world have the last word: the lady in "La Rose des Vents," the Stone in "Two Voices in a Meadow," and the Aspen in "The Aspen and the Stream." This arrangement may suggest the poet's fear of uncontrolled transcendental aspirations, for all his evident susceptibility to them.

"Two Voices in a Meadow" (A.P., p. 11) shares some

of the characteristics of "La Rose des Vents." Both poems dramatize two types of characters and two different attitudes towards existence. The structure of "Two Voices in a Meadow" is again reminiscent of a poem by William Blake, "The Pebble and the Clod," wherein the two speakers are natural objects instead of human beings. The Milkweed and the Stone represent two realms, one "Over the crib of God" and one "Under the crib of God," which comprise the universe. Each expresses its acceptance of the destiny assigned to it. The Milkweed, an organism, has the responsibility to multiply. The Stone, an inorganic being, fulfills its role by staying static:

He represents a spirit of total acceptance.
Wherever the Stone is put, he will stay. He
will feel that he is necessary to the structure
of things. Aspiring wouldn't occur to him. I
think that I do feel that way.¹⁸

Through the juxtaposition of these two, Wilbur embodies in his short poem the ironies involved in the two outlooks on life. The Milkweed, though ambitious, is humble. It knows its place, the limitation of its abilities, and its dependence on other natural forces for the fulfillment of its destiny. It aspires to transcendence but is aware that only the "great winds" can send its "White seeds . . . floating," like "cherubs/ Over the crib of God." Its spirituality is not world-renouncing, for it intends to maintain a balance between

two potential levels of existence: ascent to the sphere of the cherubs and descent to "the field." Although Wilbur claims that he tends to identify with the Stone, the poet's aspirations seem to be those of the Milkweed. With his attention never diverted from the earth, Wilbur also wants to reach a state of transcendence, having glimpses into the mysteries of the universe. In its speech, the Milkweed projects its desire to extend itself so that it can be in communion with the entire universe. It is willing to undergo the process of disintegration that is necessarily prior to regeneration:

What power had I
Before I learned to yield?
Shatter me, great wind:
I shall possess the field.

The Stone, on the contrary, lacks any ambition to explore possibilities other than those with which it is acquainted or to which it is accustomed. It seems to be modest, satisfied with the lowly status assigned to it:

As casual as cow-dung
Under the crib of God,
I lie where chance would have me,
Up to the ears in sod.

Its nonchalant attitude approaches inertia. If Wilbur truly believes that the Stone expresses his ideals, he seems to be contradicting his other conviction that a poet has to be "fearfully free" in his artistic endeavors. The irony is that the Stone's obstinacy is due not to its

humility, but to its self-importance. The stability of Heaven, according to it, depends on its immovability, its steadfastness:

Why should I move? To move
 Befits a light desire.
 The sill of Heaven would founder,
 Did such as I aspire.

Its assertion, however, is based on Biblical evidence. Christ appointed St. Peter, whose name means "stone," as the rock on which the Church is built. And Christ compared Himself to the corner-stone of the Kingdom of Heaven. The poet seems to offer an implicit resolution in the poem. While contradictory activities occur and conflicting individuals exist in this universe, in the center of it lies the "Crib of God." Christ, the God-man, the "Water Walker," one who belongs to both Heaven and Earth, holds the balance of contrasting forces, of spirituality and corporeality.

Wilbur told David Dillon: "I've sometimes written a kind of a poem in which one part of me is in conflict with another part in balanced sections. 'The Aspen and the Stream' would be an instance of that, or 'Two Voices in a Meadow.'"¹⁹ "The Aspen and the Stream" (A.P., pp. 38-40) is a dialogue of two conflicting thought-currents within the poet himself: he is torn between his thirst "to drink creation whole" and his knowledge of "the damned

universe." The dialogue alternates sextains, spoken by the Aspen, with quatrains, spoken by the Stream. The Aspen, sociable and gay, speaks in heroic couplets and with fluent rapidity, whereas the Stream rushes through its speeches in trimeter.

Both the Aspen and the Stream are dissatisfied with the roles assigned to them in the cosmic scheme. They want to annihilate their selves and become souls, but their approaches are different. The Aspen aspires to transcendence through total acceptance of the world; the kind of transcendence the Stream wants is negative, like that of Poe. Its spirit is not "world-seeing" or "world-transforming" but world-negating. It possesses the gift that the poet treasures most--vision; the Aspen addresses the Stream as "Beholding element" with a "pure eye." The Stream, however, considers "reflection" its "curse" and a "gaudy cloak." Being part of the "damned universe" that it disdains, it wants to obliterate its self altogether. The way to liberate its soul from its corporeal imprisonment seems to reverse the divine act of creation. It wants to transport itself from light to darkness, from order to chaos, and from being to non-existence:

I'll shake the daylight off
And repossess my soul

In blackness and in fall,
 Where self to self shall roar
 Till, deaf and blind to all,
 I shall be self no more.

Its self-purgation is foul play, which it intentionally
 or unintentionally admits in its speech:

Save when I rose in flood
 And in my lathered flight
 So fouled myself with mud
 As to be purged of sight.

Whereas the Stream wants to vanish into nothingness,
 the Aspen hopes to merge into allness. In a relative
 universe, what the Stream considers foul, the Aspen
 considers pure. The Stream is steadfast in its cynical
 outlook; but there is a change in the Aspen with respect
 to its attitude towards existence, from self-effacement to
 a commitment to self-development. In the beginning of
 the poem, the Aspen asks the Stream to "Teach me, like you,
 to drink creation whole/And, casting out my self, become
 a soul." Unaffected by the cynicism of the Stream, the
 Aspen remains engrossed in the activities and objects of
 the world. It indulges itself in sheer sport and word-
 play in the midst of the debate:

. . . What with the claims
 Of crow and cricket teaching me their names,
 And all this flap and shifting in my head,
 I must have lost the drift of what you said.

Although it has lost the "drift" of the Stream, the Aspen
 is the one who learns from the dialogue. Seeing the
 gloom that is associated with the world-negating kind of

spirituality, the Aspen accepts the role that it must play in life. It does not have the clear vision that the Stream has, but the Aspen is not discouraged by its limitations from "blind groping." It is determined to explore the freedom and possibilities within the limitations of its role and ability:

Out of your sullen flux I shall distil
 A gayer spirit and a clambering will,
 And reach toward all about me, and ensnare
 With roots the earth, with branches all the air--
 Even if that blind groping but achieves
 A darker head, a few more aspen-leaves.

The phrase "A darker head" recalls the "newer darker love" ("For Ellen," B.C., p. 50) that Ellen has for the world when she becomes aware of its evils; and the "bitter love" ("Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," (T.T.W., p. 5) that the soul has for mundane realities. Rooted in the earth, the Aspen ensnares "with branches all the air." It maintains a balance between the soul and the body and extends itself heavenwards and earthwards.

3. Narratives of Dilemma

Several of Wilbur's poems take the form of a narrative which embodies the rivalry between his corporeal and spiritual tendencies. With respect to subject and poetic structure, these poems--"Sunlight Is Imagination," "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness," and "Love Calls

Us to the Things of This World," for example--can be called narratives of dilemma. In most cases, the paradoxical resolution for the poet's unresolved feelings seems to be a reaffirmation of his dedication to the world which he loves but with which he quarrels.

"Sunlight Is Imagination" (B.C., pp. 37-38), a poem on the carpe diem theme, concerns the way we perceive the world and its fleeting beauty. The relation between objective reality and subjective perception takes the form of a meditation. The speaker asks, "Where/Are my eyes to run?", and ponders over the dichotomy of light and shadow, of permanence and transience.

The various postures of the lady in the sunlight compose different versions of reality to the observer-speaker in the first stanza:

Each shift you make in the sunlight somewhere
Cleaves you away into dark. Now
You are clarion hair, bright brow,
Lightcaped shoulder and armside here, and there
Gone into meadow shadow. . . .

He wonders whether he should "say you are fair/In the sun,/ Or mermaid you in the grass waving away." His lady's beauty in the "lively wasting sun" is subject to time and change, whereas a mermaid, mythic and legendary, is immortalized in art. The speaker vacillates between his appreciation of her transitory beauty and his desire to idealize and perpetuate his vision of her.

The dilemma continues in the second and the third stanzas. The poet juxtaposes the "green day" or physical reality, with "This flare of your hair" or subjective perception. First, the physical surroundings contribute to her beauty: "The whole green day builds hither to lift/ This flare of your hair." Second, the verb "lift" implies a transcendental experience, comparable to that of Juan Ponce de Leon, the discoverer of Florida at Easter in 1513. The spirit of the Resurrection seems to have inspired Juan Ponce to imagine that the eternal, ideal state was hidden somewhere behind the physical realities of Florida:

. . . the fair and noble well
Of sweetest savor and reflaire
Whose ghostly taste
And cleanse repair
All waste,
And where was ageless power from the first.

"[T]he fair and noble well" or a "Fountain of Youth," which bestows immortality on what is mortal and revives beauty that has withered, can "cleanse repair/All waste." By "wielding such sight" as Ponce de Leon, the speaker may see his lady's beauty as redeemed from the wasting process of time.

Juan Ponce's excessive thirst for a Fountain of Youth, however, ironically turns Florida into a barren desert:

Yet thirst
 Makes deserts, barrens to a sign
 Deckled and delicate arbors, bleeds
 The rose, parches the prodigal seeds
 That spring toward time in air, and breaks the spine
 Of the rock. . . .

The above passage recalls a similar paradox in Wallace Stevens' "Farewell to Florida." Florida, with its "vivid blooms,"²⁰ stands for the symbolic South of imagination to Stevens. But Stevens' uncontrolled imagination transforms the rich soil into "ashen ground"²¹ and "a sepulchral/South."²² Stevens experiences a violent reaching towards naked reality and departs from Florida for the North, though he returns to imagination's domain in "Ghosts as Cocoons," the poem immediately succeeding "Farewell to Florida" in Ideas of Order. Such an antithesis of imagination and reality is the core of the argument in Wilbur's "Sunlight Is Imagination."

The argument presented in the fourth and fifth stanzas is a debate between dynamic transience and sterile permanence. Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which treats a similar conflict, seems to have special importance for Wilbur. In Keats's ode, art perpetuates and freezes human dynamic activities on the urn, a "cold pastoral." Wilbur uses "parching" images, instead, to express a similar theme. The thirst for "the fair and noble well" can make the time-bound world seem a desert. In order to quench his thirst, the permanence-seeker parches the transient

reality. The actual and the ideal, though mutually dependent, are mutually exclusive. One has to "pine" away in order that the other may survive.

The fifth stanza is a dialogue between the object and its images, the actual and the imagined. The shadows of an object are its other selves, subject to change during the passage of time. Their existence is contingent on the existence of the actual objects: "shadows die into dying things." Although imagination enables the viewer to see the intangible dimension of the tangible, the speaker refuses to venture out too far, lest he stray away from physical reality and distort its innate qualities. He decides to reject the thirst for the "ageless power" which stops change and the passage of time. He prefers to

. . . crave
Kindly to pine
And to save
The sprout and the ponderation of the land.

"Kindly" has in this context the archaic sense, "naturally": it is natural for the beholder who is mortal himself to "crave/. . . to pine/And to save" the vitality that is associated with transience.

In the concluding stanza, the speaker temporarily resolves his dilemma. Stevens' "The Motive for Metaphor" seems relevant here. When the "weight of primary noon,"²³ as Stevens would say, dissipates all shadowy obscurities of human vision, the speaker welcomes "love in the lively

wasting sun." Wilbur himself

expect[s] that much of the poem's point lies in "lively wasting": [he] seem[s] always to have relished Shakespeare's line, "Consumed with that which it was nourished by."²⁴

The speaker suspends his quest for the eternal dimension that shadows represent and accepts love as it thrives or dies in the time-bound world. The resolution itself, however, is subject to change as time passes. Wilbur does not believe in the validity of resolutions. When asked about his attitude towards irony and paradox, he replied that a poet "is expected to refine our awareness of contradictions, rather than to resolve them."²⁵ When noon passes into afternoon, shadows reappear, and the speaker's mind probably will go through another debate between light and shadow, between art and life.

As a possible explanation of the title of the poem, Donald Hill suggests that "it is sunlight that gives things their images; and 'imagination' means simply assuming an image in 'the lively wasting sun.'"²⁶ However, Hill's explanation, being vague itself, does not quite clarify the ambiguity of the title. It is most unlikely that Wilbur intends to equate sunlight so literally with imagination. Whereas sunlight is a physical reality, "imagination," as Wilbur defines it, "is a faculty which fuses things, takes hold of the physical and ideal worlds and makes them one, provisionally."²⁷ Perhaps Wilbur

means that sunlight generates imaginative power. Yet another reference to Stevens, in this case to "The World as Meditation," may illuminate the meaning of Wilbur's elusive title. "Sunlight" and "the world" are analogous terms as both are objective realities. Imagination and meditation are closely related human faculties, meditation being "the essential exercise which . . . brings the imagination into play, releases creative power."²⁸ Stevens explores Penelope's meditation in relation to the physical world. The primitive force of the sun arouses her meditation of reunion with Ulysses and encourages her to compose an imaginative world of meaning and order for herself. In a similar fashion, Wilbur's poem explores the relationship between sunlight and imagination. As the warmth of the sun on Penelope's pillow "awakens the world in which she dwells,"²⁹ or simply her meditation on Ulysses, so too the lady and her shadow on a sunlit meadow provoke the imagination of the poet.

Human imagination should be provoked by sensory impressions: Penelope's vision of Ulysses is conjured up by her feeling of the sun's warmth. A mental reality, bare of real objects, is a sensible emptiness. The title of the poem "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness" is taken from the following passage in Thomas Traherne's Centuries of Meditations:

You are as prone to love, as the sun is to shine; it being the most delightful and natural employment of the Soul of Man: without which you are dark and miserable. Consider therefore the extent of Love, its vigour and excellency. For certainly he that delights not in Love makes vain the universe, and is of necessity to himself the greatest burden. The whole world ministers to you as the theatre of your Love. It sustains you and all objects that you may continue to love them. Without which it were better for you to have no being. Life without objects is sensible emptiness, and that is a greater misery than Death or Nothing. Objects without Love are a delusion of life.³⁰

Wilbur modifies and elaborates Traherne's concepts of light and love, and at the conclusion of the poem embodies them in a single inclusive image: "light incarnate." The narrative framework of "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness" (C., p. 5) is the Journey of the Magi, retold by the poet. Their pilgrimage becomes the soul's quest for an ideal order of perfection. The soul is represented by the "tall camels," which

. . . are slow, proud,

And move with a stilted stride
To the land of sheer horizon, hunting Traherne's
Sensible emptiness, there where the brain's lantern-
slide

Revels in vast returns.

Their search for an ideal order becomes a purely intellectual image-creating activity, devoid of any sensory experiences.

The poet in the first half of the poem explicitly rejects his quest for unsubstantial illusions, which are compared to "pure mirages" shimmering "on the brink/

. . . to the trees arrayed
 In bursts of glare, to the halo-dialing run
 Of the country creeks, and the hills' bracken tiaras
 made
 Gold in the sunken sun . . .

Objects basking in the sun are manifestations of "light incarnate." Their royalty and holiness, as indicated by words such as "halo-dialing" and "tiaras," reflect the divine kingship of Christ, the God-man. The Nativity scene, which concludes the poem, reconciles the various contrasted images of light: love interpenetrates all beings and sustains the balance between God and man, man and objects, spirit and body, the heavenly and the lowly. Around the barn, the humble and the divine are juxtaposed against each other: the "lampshine" and the "supernova," the "beasts" and Christ. The Christmas story, as it does in "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," "Two Voices in a Meadow," and "A Christmas Hymn," suggests a possible resolution to the spirit-body contention: the "right Oasis" for the camels is "light incarnate." The Holy Infant is the ideal that gives meaning and purpose to the journey of the Magi.

The title "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" (T.T.W., pp. 5-6) itself reflects the concept of the Incarnation. According to Wilbur, this title is taken from St. Augustine: "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return

to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian; Augustine says it is love that brings us back."³² The situation described in the poem takes place "at perhaps seven-thirty in the morning" in "a bedroom high up in a city apartment building."³³ Awakened by "a cry of pulleys," the soul sees the first load of laundry being hung across the sky. Immediately, a mundane reality metamorphoses into an angelic vision: the cleanly washed "bed-sheets," "blouses," and "smocks" are hanging on the clothes-lines like angels. Temporarily separated from its corporeal imprisonment, the soul in its state of transcendence "Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple/As false dawn." In the first half of the poem, the imagery is related to this basic metaphor: the soul-angel-laundry comparison.

The insubstantial state of transcendence is reinforced by words such as "bodiless," "impersonal," "nobody," and "false." The "false dawn" simultaneously diverts the reader forward to the "rosy hands" scrubbing soiled clothes and provides an ethereal feeling as thin-bodied as the angelic vision generated from clean laundry. The overlapping connotations of the interlocking images deny the reader any possibility of paraphrasing without oversimplifying the richness of the poetry. The dawn, the clean wash, and the angels are mingled to mirror the "halcyon feeling" of the half-awake soul. The metaphor

"halcyon feeling" is most apt as it describes the floating tranquility that the soul experiences: the halcyon is

A bird of which the ancients fabled that it bred about the time of the winter solstice in a nest floating on the sea, and that it charmed the wind and waves so that the sea was specially calm during the period.³⁴

This moment of bliss, however, is fleeting. The body being on the verge of waking,

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed day . . .

The adjective "punctual," in addition to its ordinary sense of "coming promptly at an appointed time," has here perhaps the added suggestion of "puncture." The "rape" of each "blessed day" or the contamination of the soul is an inevitability, an assured and painful daily occurrence. The soul tries to reduce the confusions of existence to a few simple tangible activities, which serve as stepping stones to its transcendence: the "rosy hands in the rising steam" and clean laundry dancing "in the sight of heaven."

Yet the false dawn and the angelic vision dissipate in the life-giving sun, which "acknowledges/With a warm look the world's hunks and colors." And the soul completes its daily three-stage ritual: its transcendence, its reluctance to return to its bodily imprisonment, and its final acceptance of its corporeal counterpart. The body

waking, the vision of angels hanging on clothes-lines becomes a sight of criminals hanging at their "ruddy gallows." The "gallows," however, recalls the Crucifixion, and by extension the Incarnation. The reference to the "thieves" in the immediately following line clinches the implications. The descent of the soul is both an acceptance of the Fall of the whole human race with Adam and an imitation of the archetypal Incarnation. Perhaps Wilbur suggests that acceptance of man's destiny and his position in the cosmic scheme is a form of redemption.

The language of the poem corresponds to the dichotomy between spirituality and corporeality. Elevated and colloquial expressions are juxtaposed against each other; "omnipresence" and "hunks," as Wilbur himself points out, are in close proximity to each other.³⁵ The rhythm arises from the depiction of movements, objects, and the speaker's emotions. The third stanza very well demonstrates Wilbur's mastery of kinetic effects. The phrase "terrible speed" transfers the reader's eye rapidly across the page as the laundry flutters in the strong wind. The tempo slackens and comes to a halt when the laundry in the lapsed wind "swoon[s] down into so rapt a quiet/That nobody seems to be there." The period after "there" reinforces the dead silence. The rapidity and subsequent halting of motion correspond

though it is also "world-transforming." In his poetry,
it is his mandate to achieve a balance between his imagination and the things of this world.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

¹Richard Wilbur, Introduction to Poe, Complete Poems, Laurel Poetry Series (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1959), p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe", in Poe, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 120. This article first appeared in Anniversary Lectures 1959 (Washington D. C.: Reference Department, Library of Congress, 1959), pp. 21-38.

⁴Introduction to Poe, Complete Poems, p. 17.

⁵See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", pp. 221-222.

⁶See Stitt, p. 78.

⁷"On My Own Work", Responses, p. 125.

⁸"Sumptuous Destitution", Responses, p. 11. This speech was given in 1959 as part of the Town of Amherst's bicentennial celebration, and was published with the speeches by Archibald MacLeish and Lousie Bogan in Emily Dickinson: Three Views (Amherst: Amherst College Press, 1960), pp. 35-46.

⁹See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", pp. 218-219.

¹⁰"On My Own Work", Responses, p. 119.

¹¹Father Cuthbert, Life of St. Francis of Assisi (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), p. 154.

¹²St. Francis of Assisi, The Little Flowers of St. Francis (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1910), p. 16.

¹³The Poems of William Blake, ed. W. H. Stevenson and text by David V. Erdman (London: Longman Group

Limited, 1971), p. 221.

Ah, sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done;

Where the youth pined away with desire
And the pale virgin shrouded in snow
Arise from their graves and aspire
Where my sunflower wishes to go.

¹⁴Hill, p. 57.

¹⁵Weatherhead, A.K. "Richard Wilbur: Poetry of Things", ELH, XXXV (December 1968), 608.

¹⁶Andrew Marvell, "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure" and "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body", The Complete English Poems, ed. Elizabeth S. Denno (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), pp. 25-28, 103-104.

W. B. Yeats, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London: MacMillan and Co., 1950), pp. 265-267.

¹⁷Wilbur explains the title: "The French call the compass-rose the Rose of the Winds." See Ciardi, p. 12.

¹⁸See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 218.

¹⁹David Dillon, "The Image and the Object: An Interview with Richard Wilbur", Southwest Review, LVIII (Summer 1973), 242.

²⁰The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 118.

²¹Ibid., p. 117.

²²Ibid., p. 117.

²³Ibid., p. 288.

²⁴Wilbur's letter to Wai, March 6, 1980, incorporated into "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur," see Appendix, p. 234.

²⁵See Ciardi, p. 5.

²⁶Hill, p. 36.

²⁷See Stitt, p. 78.

²⁸Louis L. Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation", in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, ed. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1972), p. 213.

²⁹The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 520.

³⁰Thomas Traherne, "Second Century, Meditation 65", in Centuries of Meditations, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Bertram Dobell, 1908), pp. 124-125.

³¹c.f. the sonnet "O" (B.C., p. 40), in which Wilbur criticizes and reverses the mathematicians' effort to reduce real objects to abstract shapes.

³²Richard Wilbur, Essay in "On Richard Wilbur's 'Love Calls Us to the Things of This World'", in The Contemporary Poets as Artist and Critic: Eight Symposia, ed. Anthony Ostroff, p. 18. The symposium on Wilbur's poem (pp. 2-21) was originally published in Berkeley Review, I (1957), 31-51. Wilbur's essay was written in reply to the speeches given by Richard Eberhart, Robert Horan, and May Swenson.

³³"On My Own Work," Responses, p. 124.

³⁴Oxford English Dictionary.

³⁵"On My Own Work", Responses, p. 124.

³⁶See Hutton, p. 62.

CHAPTER IV

ART AND REALITY

So that paradoxically it is respect for reality which makes a necessity of artifice. Poetry's prime weapon is words, used for the naming, comparison, and contrast of things. Its auxiliary weapons are rhythms, formal patterns, and rhymes. It is by means of all these that poets create difficulties for themselves, which they then try to surmount. I cannot see that any of them needs or ought to be dispensed with.

--Richard Wilbur, "The Bottles Become New,
Too"

Both Wilbur and Stevens express in their poetry a conviction that it is the artist's role to translate the dynamic and elusive reality into verbal patterns. And he needs metaphors to formulate his impressions of, and establish a relationship with, the fugitive events which excite him. Such an interest in the interplay between imagination and reality belongs, of course, to the general poetic movement initiated by the nineteenth-century British Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge.

To Stevens, reality exists only as it is perceived

and experienced. Although Stevens celebrates the sensual delights of the earth, he consistently stresses: "We live in the mind."¹ Stark reality is formless, and order is a transcendental experience imaginatively imposed on a "slovenly wilderness." In Stevens' "Idea of Order at Key West," the dark "ever-hooded" water itself is devoid of any specific meaning:

The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves . . .²

"The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,"³ when reshaped by human language, assume a new identity which is intelligible to the poet-observer:

It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.⁴

Stevens in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" suggests that reality might have an order of its own, which he would like to discover:

. . . But to impose is not
To discover. To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. . . .⁵

Yet the repetition of "possible" expresses only a desperate wish. More frequently he exalts the primacy of imagination instead:

The magnificent cause of being,
 The imagination, the one reality
 In this imagined world . . .⁶

Unlike Stevens, Wilbur maintains that imagination is only an imitation of the archetypal divine act of creation. He humbles himself before reality and its Creator. In "All These Birds" and "An Event," Wilbur expresses his reverence for reality, whose order he honors and loves.

1. Motive for Metaphor

The numerous birds mentioned in "All These Birds" (T.T.W., pp. 41-42) include the hawk, lark, nightingale, water-ousel, gull, heron, phoenix, stork, sparrow, and dove. They have an order of their own and refuse to surrender themselves to another order devised by man, be it scientific or artistic. The poem is a hymn to the Muse, invoking her to redeem what has been lost to science and worn-out myths. The poet feels the need for a new, metaphorical language to embody the naturalness of nature. The "wingèd words" of freedom, confined in literary clichés and scientific reductive statements, have "gone rather stale."

Science applies theories and formulae to the study of nature:

. . . we seek
 Vainly to know the heron
 (but can plot

Imagination is a "lie" only in the sense that it is not a naked fact. The new world created as a result of the synthesis between human imagination and the phenomenal world is as true as physical reality. And imagination, being as spontaneous as birds themselves, is part of the natural world that it transforms:

Oh, let it climb wherever it can cling
Like some great trumpet-vine, a natural thing
To which all birds that fly

come natural.

Come, stranger, sister, dove:
Put on the reins of love.

"The reins of love" refers to the connatural bond between man and nature. The poet relies on his imagination to create a language which channels the correspondences between man and landscape.

The poem "An Event" (T.T.W., p. 46) describes the difficulty involved in translating into words the correspondences between human imagination and recalcitrant landscape. The speaker is observing "A landscapeful of small black birds" departing "From the pale trees and fields they settled on," and convening "at some command/ At once in the middle of the air." Many birds behaving as one, their flight expresses a pattern regulated by "some command" which, however, is beyond the grasp of the poet-observer. The birds' unpredictable mobility motivates the poet to several delightful similes, in

the hope of catching their "divergencies" "in the nets and cages of my thought." He compares their impetuous movements to "a cast of grain [that] leapt back to the hand," and to "a drunken fingerprint [that rolls] across the sky." Yet the words "net" and "cage" suggest that the stasis of art has failed to do justice to the vitality of real life. The observer and the observed are in combat with each other. The birds want to stay free of any captivity, while the poet contrives to enmesh them in human language. While the poet is involved in "Shaping these images to make them stay" in his poetry and in his mind, the birds "tower up, shatter, and madden space/With their divergencies," obliterating any impressions that he has formulated. Yet the poet does not despair, and the tone of the poem remains joyous:

Delighted with myself and with the birds,
I set them down and give them leave to be.
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.

Although the birds resist his ordering, Wilbur finds that their resistance stimulates his creativity. He told Joan Hutton in an interview: "And I like the world to resist my ordering of it, so that I can feel it is real and that I'm honoring its reality."⁷ The "cross-purposes" are the intersection of the power of words and "the defeat of words," of motion and stillness, and

of art and reality. The "flying moment" prompts the artist to recreate the texture and meaning of this event, and the artist accommodates the birds in the world he dreams. The world that the poet creates is a reverberation of the archetypal Creation in Genesis.

Wilbur relates the "cross-purposes" of the artist and reality to the relation between the rain-dancer and the rain:

As Susanne Langer says, ". . . the most important virtue of the rite is not so much its practical as its religious success . . . its power to articulate a relation between man and nature. . . ."

The rain-dancer casts down his fingers like rain shafts, or beats with his feet somewhat as the rain tramples the earth. But it isn't really like the rain; it can't begin to substitute for what it refers to. It is not a mere imitation, but a magic borrowing of the powers it wants to approach, and a translation of what is borrowed into the language of the dancing human body.⁸

Art is a ritualistic reshaping of reality to create an intended effect. Naked reality motivates the artist to metaphor, and he in return gives reality form and patterns. The difficulty of this relation arises from the intricacy involved in achieving a "borrowing of the powers" from the real object.

Two major themes overlap in the poem "The Beacon" (T.T.W., pp. 21-22), the first being man's attempt to establish a relation with nature by humanizing it. The beacon sweeping over the "night-fouled sea" is like

the light of the soul attempting to illuminate the darkness of the mysterious universe. The dark, perplexing sea remains alien to man unless it is charted by "meridians," or lit by a beacon, or humanized in mythology or artifice. The allusions to "the Nereid" and the "meridians" suggest the poet's belief in tradition and heritage, the positive aspects of art and science, which have organized the unintelligible universe into a system and translated it into a language comprehensible to the human mind. The beacon and the sea represent a combat between light and darkness, order and chaos, artifice and reality. The mystery of the sea is compared to the intricate Gordian knot tied by Gordius, king of Gordium in Phrygia. Nobody found the secret to untie it, for its puzzling complexity was beyond the power of human imagination; but Alexander the Great simply cut through the knot with his sword. His approach to the difficulty may not have done justice to its intricacy, yet this drastic imposition seems to have been the only solution available. Man's attempt to solve nature's mysteries must, if it is to be effective, be as arbitrary as that of Alexander. The beacon, representing human intelligence and human vision,

. . . blinks at its own brilliance,
Over and over with cutlass gaze
Solving the Gordian waters . . .

Second, the poem shows two different modes of reality; one is bathed in artificial light and the other is bare of any human projections. The beacon evokes a romantic vision of "the buxom, lavish/Romp of the ocean-daughters." The familiar mythic seascape vanishes as the light blinks. All that remains is stark reality--"the sea-in-itself," a "black pearl"--for which "the dark of the eye/Dives." The blackness of the pearl refers not only to its incalculable worth but also to its obscurity and potential horror. The poet attempts to communicate with the "sea-in-itself," but all his efforts are futile and frustrating:

. . . 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. . . .

Impersonal reality is darkness rolling on darkness, like the chaotic mass before God ordered it with light. The poet encounters a moment of chaos and terror, suggested by the blackness and blindness of the waves. Yet it is important to note that Wilbur uses "blinded" instead of "blind" to describe the waves. They are not intrinsically blind but are "blinded" by a sudden onslaught and withdrawal of flashes of light. Reality assumes an understandable identity only when it is illuminated by human perception. And the human mind, awake or asleep, cannot

enter the heart of the sea or the thing-in-itself:

. . . 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.

Any figurative description of reality is only a possible approximation. The idea that the invincible universe or the "deaf unbeatable sea" refuses to yield its secrets to man recalls a similar description of the man-and-sea relationship in Marianne Moore's "The Grave":

Man looking into the sea,
taking view from those who have as much right to it as
you have to it yourself,
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
but you cannot stand in the middle of this . . .⁹

Both Marianne Moore and Wilbur admit that the scope of the physical world is beyond man's full compass. The soul in "The Beacon" weeps at its helplessness. The images, "Alexandrine tears" and "one grand chop," refer back to the "cutlass gaze" and "the Gordian waters" in the first stanza. Before the unfathomable grand scheme, man accepts his humility. The only response that man can elicit from the "deaf unbeatable sea" involves drastic human impositions:

. . . Rail

At the deaf unbeatable sea, my soul, and weep
Your Alexandrine tears, but look:
The beacon-blaze unsheathing turns
The face of darkness pale

And now with one grand chop gives clearance to
Our human visions, which assume
The waves again, fresh and the same.

The word "assume" may mean "usurp" or "arrogate," or "take on the form of." Man, though incompatible with the enigmatic sea, arrogates to himself the authority to order its wilderness. The waves become "fresh" because they have been synthesized with human vision and imagination into a new reality, yet the intrinsic nature of the waves remains the "same." The poet concludes his observation and meta-physical commentary, pleading:

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.

"Our plainest light" stands in contrast to the "darkness" of the sea, the wilderness which is beyond man's mental grasp. Man can relate to the mysterious unknown only through either a mythological concept ("Nereid's kick") or a physical construction (a ship). Through the inventions of art, man comes to know nature and personalizes her with affection as "the Nereid's kick endears/The tossing spray."

As Stevens' jar, placed on a mountain top in Tennessee, organizes the wilderness around it, so Wilbur's "sighted ship/Assembles all the sea." The intrusion of human artifice--ship and beacon--into the natural world helps to place non-human phenomena in a more comfortable perspective. Yet in one sense this order

seems as violent as Alexander's "grand chop." Wilbur's own comments on Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" are relevant here:

Isn't "Anecdote of the Jar" an illustration of Stevens's idea that a violent order can be a disorder? The jar seems pompous, lifeless, birdless, bushless; it mars the world's vitality in the process of composing it.¹⁰

Human artifice can hardly do justice to the intricacy of "the Gordian waters"; yet in "The Beacon" it would seem to provide the best sort of justice at man's disposal.

2. Art and Life

The conflict between reality and art is a clash between time and timelessness, dynamic transience and static permanence, randomness and order. In the creative process, the artist learns different possibilities of formulating his subjective impressions of phenomena. He expresses his emotive knowledge of mutable reality in objective forms--a poem, a painting, or a piece of sculpture. Art is not life, but a representation of life. In "L'Etoile" (B.C., p. 36), for example, Wilbur recreates what Degas did on canvas in 1876: the painter perceived and captured the fleeting moment of perfection achieved by a ballet dancer:

A rushing music, seizing on her dance,
Now lifts it from her, blind into the light;

And blind the dancer, tiptoe on the boards
Reaches a moment toward her dance's flight.

Even as she aspires in loudening shine
The music pales and sweetens, sinks away;
And past her arabesque in shadow show
The fixt feet of the maître de ballet.

But she must return from this momentary artistic world of
timelessness to the world of reality and of time:

So she will turn and walk through metal halls
To where some ancient woman will unmesh
Her small strict shape, and yawns will turn her face
Into a little wilderness of flesh.

The contrast of "strict shape" and "wilderness" evokes
a disillusioning realization of the disparity between a
formal structure and incoherent life.

Wilbur states his position on the "tension
between a formative mind and a reality" in "The Bottles
Become New, Too":

Neither the mysterious world nor the formative mind
can be denied. As Cézanne said of painting, "One
cannot be too scrupulous or too sincere or too
submissive to nature; but one is more or less master
of one's model, and above all, of the means of
expression." In the best paintings of Cézanne you
are aware of the tremendous mass, immediacy, and
entity of the world, and at the same time of the
mastery of the mind which got that into a frame.
Every Cézanne is a moment of tension between a
formative mind and a reality which that mind
insists on recognizing. It is a dynamic balance,
a fierce calm like that in Delacroix's fresco at
Saint-Sulpice of the struggle between Jacob and
the Angel. Sainte-Victoire is more than any
painting of it. But the important thing is to
have a relation to the mountain.¹¹

The prideless laborers in "Junk" (A.P., pp. 15-17)

are neither "scrupulous" nor "submissive to nature." They debase nature and mistake art for a piece of merchandise. Compared with Wayland's craftsmanship, the junk pieces these laborers have made look strikingly incongruous. The achievement of Wayland is complimented in the epigraph:

Huru Welandes	
monna ænignum	word ne geswiceð
heardne gehealdan.	ðara ðe Mimming can

Wilbur's note on the above quotation reads: "The epigraph, taken from a fragmentary Anglo-Saxon poem [Waldere], concerns the legendary smith Wayland, and may roughly be translated: 'Truly, Wayland's handiwork--the sword Mimming which he made--will never fail any man who knows how to use it bravely'" (A.P., p. 64).

The epigraph provides an index to the form and theme of the rest of the poem. "Junk" is written in the Anglo-Saxon alliterative form, in praise of craftsmanship demonstrated by the legendary smith Wayland and the mythic god Hephaestus. The elaborate metrical patterns of Anglo-Saxon poetry are based on two major principles: those of stress and those of alliteration. These devices, adding emphasis and pulse, are intended to aid the memory of the story-teller who delivers the poetry in the form of oral recitative. Each line in "Junk" is separated into two halves by a caesura; one

stressed syllable of one half and two stressed syllables of the other half are alliterative. The heavy caesura successfully builds up the expectation of the reader, whose interest is sustained and then satisfied in the second half-line. Each half-line, due to its shortness, intensifies the reader's attention to each object described. And the alliteration, giving an incantatory rhythm, smoothly integrates the two seemingly choppy phrases in the ear of the listener and the eye of the reader.

Wilbur applies the Anglo-Saxon grand style to the treatment of litter in contemporary life. The mock-heroic tone, however, is interlaced with seriousness:

An axe angles from my neighbor's ashcan;
 It is hell's handiwork, the wood not hickory,
 The flow of the grain not faithfully followed.

This axe and other "jerrybuilt things," for example "plastic playthings," "paper plates," and "shattered tumblers," are "to be trundled/in the trash-man's truck." The tumblers are shattered because they "were not annealed/for the time needful." The cheapness and ugliness of the "gimcrack" show that the prideless laborers have prostituted their craft "for a little money." They pollute the world we live in with "hell's handiwork," products from assembly-lines, bare of

craftsmanship. These laborers have violated the dignity of objects. Their handiwork is shameless and artless. By extension, Wilbur denounces all those who are unfaithful to their professions,

like the bought boxer
Who pulls his punches,
Who in the home stretch or the paid-off jockey
 holds in his horse.

Contrasted with the shameless men who have abused their art, the things

in thoughtless honor
Have kept composure,
 like captives who would not
Talk under torture.

The sun, the master of reality, reclaims objects of its own by stripping away the artless confinement imposed on them:

The sun shall glory in the glitter of glass-chips,
Foreseeing the salvage
 of the prisoned sand,
And the blistering paint
 peel off in patches,
That the good grain be discovered again.

The poem ends as it is prefaced, with allusions to the past. Wilbur's attitude towards the art of allusion is clearly expressed in his prose, as for example, in his article "Round About a Poem of Housman's":

The poet needs this lively past as a means of viewing the present without provinciality, and of saying much in little; he must hope for the tact and the talent to make that past usable

for the audience that his poems imply. My friend John Ciardi once said, "Pompeii is everybody's home town, sooner or later." I should add that for every poet, whatever he may say as critic or polemicist, Pompeii is still a busy quarter of the city of imagination.¹²

Wilbur succeeds in meeting his own standards in the use of allusions. The references to Hephaestus and Wayland place the garbage dump in a broad context. The poet effectively juxtaposes the rubbish with the craftsmanship of two legendary smiths:

Then burnt, bulldozed,	they shall all be buried
To the depth of diamonds,	in the making dark
Where halt Hephaestus	keeps his hammer
And Wayland's work	is worn away.

Hephaestus' hammer, a symbol of artistic creativity, has made beautiful gifts for Aphrodite and armours for Achilles. And the sword Mimming that Wayland wrought is a contrast to the nameless junk pieces. Transformed by the magic of art, Mimming assumes the dignity of a distinct personality. Wayland's handiwork may be "worn away" in the continuous disintegrative and regenerative cycle, but the spirit of his artistic achievement is commemorated and invoked by the contemporary poet. The sword Mimming may deteriorate, but the artistic integrity it embodies "will never fail any man who knows how to use it bravely": it has become an everlasting model

for those who have the courage to fend off contemporary commercialism. Yet the end of the poem emphasizes that nature restores herself by "wearing away" man's handiwork, be it junk or artifice.

Although man and nature seem to be in combat with each other, they are in some respects basically akin. Wilbur treats this paradoxical relationship between man and nature in "Ceremony" (C., p. 55), where he shows his aristocratic respect for ritualistic forms in both nature and society. (Such a notion of ceremony is expressed by Yeats in several poems, particularly in "A Prayer for My Daughter" and "The Second Coming.")

"Ceremony" begins with Wilbur's response to a painting by the nineteenth-century French Impressionist painter, Bazille:¹³

A striped blouse in a clearing by Bazille
Is, you may say, a patroness of boughs
Too queenly kind toward nature to be kin.

The reader immediately senses the poet's awareness of man's intrusion into nature, and his perception of the contrast between civilization and wilderness. The "kind"-*"kin"* antithesis recalls Hamlet's aside in which he uses the same pun: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (I.ii.65). Hamlet's closer kinship with the king, however, is a result of barbarity and chaos: the murder of Hamlet's father and the murderer's marriage to Hamlet's mother.

Thus the girl in Wilbur's poem who seems to be "queenly kind," or supremely civil, must be alien to the wild, unruly life of the forest. But the second half of the first stanza contradicts this assumption. Although the formality of the girl's attire distinguishes her from the surrounding woods,

. . . ceremony never did conceal
 Save to the silly eye, which all allows,
 How much we are the woods we wander in.

If the lady were without social mannerisms and formal dress and appeared instead as Sabrina the water-nymph, the nature-man distinction would be invisible in her. Without this contrast, Bazille's scene would have lost its meaning and form. "[F]resh from stream," closely associated with the sun and the fern beds, and having become "the flowers' cynosure," Sabrina is Nature herself and Nature is she. The "nymph and wood" interpenetrate each other's being:

Then nymph and wood must nod and strive to dream
 That she is airy earth, the trees, undone,
 Must ape her languor natural and pure.

Yet their mingling of identities results in an absence of contrast and consequently a loss of vigor. Words such as "slowed," "Bedded," "dream," and "languor" create an atmosphere of sleepiness and oppressive stillness.

The poet yawns, "Ho-hum." The idyllic scene associated with Sabrina is too pure or uniform and

harmonious to provoke any creative impulse. The poet dispels the drowsiness and praises the "wit and wakefulness"--imagination and dynamic contrast--embodied in the lady. The concluding stanza demonstrates that beneath the ceremonious appearance of "curtsey and quadrille," man and nature are akin. The lady's "social smile and formal dress" only "lightly" hide her bond with the wild, uncereemonious "tigers." Through the contrast between wild life and civilization, the presence of tigers and the lady's etiquette are more intensely felt. Wilbur shares Bazille's recognition of the interaction among objects in a certain environment, and juxtaposes them with each other accordingly to provide a surprising and revealing effect. Ironically, while the lady's social formality lends contrast to the forest, her stripes, resembling those of the tigers', reinforce the impression that she is part of "the woods" she "wander[s] in." Like the lady, both Bazille and Wilbur feign. Bazille frames his response to reality in a painting, while Wilbur fables his interpretation of Bazille's impression in a poem, ceremoniously observant of restrictions of rhythm and rhyme.

The poem "A Dutch Courtyard" (B.C., p. 25) articulates Wilbur's interpretation of another painting--Pieter de Hooch's "Courtyard with Two Officers and a Woman Drinking" of 1656.¹⁴ The structure of Wilbur's

poem "A Dutch Courtyard" involves two contrasts, one of them a contrast between art and life that is reminiscent of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."¹⁵ Art, in the form of a Grecian urn or a painting, manages to "oxidize" fleeting moments of aesthetic delight, but it changes flesh-and-blood human beings to motionless figures. The girl figured on Keats's urn will never be possessed physically and thus can never fulfill her destiny. Likewise, the girl in Pieter de Hooch's painting

. . . will never turn,

Cry what you dare, but smiles
Tirelessly toward the seated cavalier,
Who will not proffer you his pot of beer . . .

In Keats's poem, the bliss of permanence, suggested in the second stanza and highlighted by the repetition of "happy" in the third, is negated by the repetition of "not" and its variants. Similarly, "never," "nor," and "not" punctuate Wilbur's description of the people and the objects in the painting. Being merely a replica of actuality, art lacks the warmth and vitality of real life. Keats's "silent form" and "Cold Pastoral" and Wilbur's "surprising strict Propriety" communicate the two poets' acknowledgement of the limitations of art.

The second contrast is between de Hooch's "intransitive eye" and Old Andrew Mellon's spiritual short-sightedness. Pieter de Hooch has captured the

essence of the experienced moment, of which he gives an artistic expression. The courtyard, "consumed with sun" and perfected in imaginative formulation, stands in the intersection of time and timelessness:

. . . This courtyard may appear
To be consumed with sun,

Most mortally to burn,
Yet it is quite beyond the reach of eyes
Or thoughts . . .

Andrew Mellon, handicapped by his materialistic tendencies, fails to transcend his limitations and step imaginatively into the timeless world embodied in de Hooch's painting:

Consumed with greedy ire,
Old Andrew Mellon glowered at this Dutch
Courtyard, until it bothered him so much
He bought the thing entire.

The adjective "Old," strategically placed at the beginning of the line and capitalized, stresses Mellon's mortality. "Teased out of thought," unable to tolerate the immunity of the painting to his greedy regard, Mellon buys "the thing entire." Mellon is an unflattering example of the possessive libido that a painting can provoke; he is exceptional only in that he can satisfy his impulse because of his wealth. The painting to him is not a work of art, but a "thing," a collector's item. The words "proper" and "propriety" have an ironic overtone, satirizing the greed of man in general and of Mellon in particular. Mellon's idea of the "proper uses" of art

is private property, an additon to his special collection. His purchase of the painting is self-defeating, because the painting cannot be "owned" in any normal sense. Yet, in another sense it can be. Although the poet says that "pictures . . . are/Immune to us," ironically de Hooch's painting penetrates Wilbur's imagination, which reshapes the painter's artistic experience and influence into another art form--a poem.

3. Dialogue Between Artists

A characteristically large number of Wilbur's poems are prompted by the poet's reflections on the works of visual artists: Degas, Pieter de Hooch, Delacroix, Géricault, Bazille, and Giacometti. "L'Etoile," "The Giaour and the Pacha," "A Dutch Courtyard," and "Giacometti" are some of the examples. In these poems, the poet formulates his verbal interpretation of his fellow-artists' impressions of reality. Wilbur uses a personal anecdote to show how art derives from art:

I remember a dinner party at a house in Cambridge, years ago. Almost everyone at the table that evening could be considered some sort of an artist, and it occurred to our host to suggest that we all testify, in turn, as to how we had first felt the call to practice one art or another. To tell the truth, I have forgotten most of the testimony, but I do recall what kind of thing was said. The novelist, let's suppose, had come across a set of Trollope in a summerhouse; the composer had heard Caruso on the gramophone, or an organist

practicing Bach in an empty church; the portrait painter, perhaps, had gone with his mother to call on Mr. Sargent in his studio. It was all like that. Not one of the deponents had anything to say about the turmoil of first love, the song of the thrush, or the Bay of Naples. What had started them off as artists, they said, were no such approved stimuli, but the encounter with art itself. Astonished by a poem, a painting, a fugue, they had wanted to make something like that.¹⁶

"Giacometti" and "The Writer" are useful examples to illustrate the influence of art on the artist. "Giacometti" was written probably after the poet's visit to the sculptor's studio. In "The Writer," a poem on Wilbur's own daughter, he casts himself as an older, established poet who, watching a younger, aspiring writer at work, writes about writing.

The poem "Giacometti" (C., pp. 50-52) begins with a combat between the sculptor and the rock, which is sculpted in the image of man. The hardness of the rock begets a sympathetic response in man. Man is "proud"; and rocks are scornful and "boldly browed." These two opposing forces, in their struggle against each other, show dignity and defiance. While the stones "with fists/. . . still unstirring strike," men "with a patient rage/. . . carve cliff, shear stone to blocks." The sculptor must force his way, through violence, into the being of the material with which he works. The stone, however, guards the access to its being with "fierce

composure." And each defence provokes a new technique of violent entrance. This battle continues till the two conflicting principles are synthesized, or until the "buried glare" of the rock "begets a like/Anger in us, and finds our hardness."

The images of man carved in stone express man's idealistic aspirations. But there is a discrepancy between man's ideals expressed by sculptors of the past and man's real self, in every age but especially in the Twentieth Century:

High in the air those habitants of stone
Look heavenward, lean to a thought, or stride
Toward some concluded war,
While we on every side,
Random as shells the sea drops down ashore,
Are walking, walking, many and alone.

The vision of modern man as a mobile, solitary but unindividuated walker is appropriately shown by Giacometti's sculptures, built out of "plaster chalk" instead of carved out of stone. Giacometti, famous for his "figures de l'inachèvement pétrifié,"¹⁷

allonge ses figures et aplatit ses têtes, sans cesser de copier le modèle, parce que c'est le seul moyen dont il dispose, à tel moment de son expérience, pour rendre ce qu'il voit, et faire ressemblant. Les caractères de ses œuvres qui semblent l'éloigner du réalisme ne sont que les manifestations d'un réalisme supérieur, à la fois plus large et plus précis, qui n'a plus pour objet l'homme ou le monde tels qu'ils sont, mais tels que l'œil de Giacometti les voit.¹⁸

In Wilbur's poem, the repetition of "we are" in the

indicative mood implies that the poet tends to agree with
Giacometti's concept of modern man,

Whose fullness is escaped
Like a burst balloon's: no nakedness so bare
As flesh gone in inquiring of the bone.

"[P]runed of every gesture, saving only/The habit of
coming and going," modern man is reduced to a "starless"
walking skeleton, aimless, "anonymous and lonely."
Existence to him is a duration of "walking, walking."
However, his pilgrimage, consisting of only "infinite
farewells," does not lead to any purposeful destinations.
The word "starless" implies that modern man lacks guidance
and knowledge of his fate. As he "cannot guess/His will,"
he does not know his destiny and is powerless to define
it.

With Giacometti, man is reduced to his minimal
form; and thus the poet wonders what will become of man in
the future and "[w]hat stony shape" will "hold" him:

And volumes hover round like future shades
This least of man, in whom we join and take
A pilgrim's step behind,
And in whose guise we make
Our grim departures now, walking to find
What railleries of rock, what palisades?

The poem ends on a pessimistic note. "Our grim departures"
are the "infinite farewells" in the aimless pilgrimage.
Man's purposeless walking will continue into the future.
Yet this pessimism is ambiguous; the poem is essentially a
tribute to Giacometti. The ideals of art have changed, but

they may not have changed for the worse. Somehow the Michaelangelo type of monumental sculpture does not reflect the wayward flow of human realities. Instead, Giacometti's less fixed, more flexible, and more adaptable figures give an appropriate impression of the life of modern man. Giacometti's studio, "Dim as a cave of the sea," may suggest Proteus--the Shape-changer. Nevertheless, the ancient grandiose mode does not belong to us, while Giacometti has chosen an artistic medium which still reflects us. The representation of modern man as he is may be a step towards other ideals awaiting man in the future. Wilbur leaves his poem open-ended--like a Giacometti sculpture, not fully-fleshed.

Of the poems discussed in this chapter, "The Writer" (M.R., pp. 4-5) is the least impersonal: the poet is more directly present. The title of the poem refers to the poet's daughter, who is composing a story on the typewriter, and to the poet himself, who attempts to organize his observations into verse. The poem is based upon a contrast of two metaphors, one rejected and the other accepted. Flurries of noise from the "typewriter-keys" provoke the poet to look for an image to embody his experience of hearing. The typing sounds "Like a chain hauled over a gunwale." This image of the ship is continued in his comparison of "the stuff/Of her

life" to "a great cargo." The poet wishes his daughter
 "a lucky passage."

But she seems to reject the analogy of writing
 to delivery of goods and to an ocean-voyage:

But now it is she who pauses,
 As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
 A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
 And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
 Of strokes, and again is silent.

The first "figure" is "easy" because the poet seems to
 have formulated his impressions as a matter of habit
 or because the voyage-life analogy is quite facile and
 stale. The simile "a chain hauled over a gunwale,"
 which imitates only the sound of typing, oversimplifies
 the complexities of writing and fails to demonstrate
 the intensity of a vigorous struggle associated with
 the creative process or with the imposing of an artistic
 order upon reality.

The contrast of noise and silence reminds the poet
 of a bird "which was trapped in that very room, two
 years ago." The physical manifestations of "the dazed
 starling" battering "against the brilliance" and dropping
 "like a glove/To the hard floor, or the desk-top" are
 similar to the flurries of "typewriter-keys" followed by
 short periods of thinking. More importantly, both the
 bird and the girl are in agony, literally or metaphorically

"humped and bloody," searching for "the right window," which means a passage to freedom for the "iridescent creature" and a successful projection of her "heavy" thoughts for the writer. Moreover, both metaphors of ship and bird--which suggest the idea of "breaking through" or "getting through"--do not bear only on her writing, but also on her life in general. The word "iridescent" suggests that the movements of the bird, like the girl's composition, are elusive of "easy" figures. The colors of its plumage changed with the different positions it took. Literally the bird fought against the confining walls; and, figuratively like the birds in "An Event," it has been resisting the poet's attempt to translate its physical presence into words. The caged bird becomes an image for both the poet and his daughter, struggling alike for expression.

In helping the bird escape, both father and daughter were united in spirit with the bird. They shared the same happiness which the bird must have experienced when it finally found its way to the opened window. The father-and-daughter union is suggested by the use of the first person plural pronouns, "our" and "we": "we stole in, lifted a sash/And retreated, not to affright it"; "We watched the sleek, wild, dark/And iridescent creature"; and

. . . how our spirits
 Rose when, suddenly sure,
 It lifted off from a chair-back,
 Beating a smooth course for the right window
 And clearing the sill of the world.

The poet's concern for the bird is a reflection of his love for his daughter. The bird "clearing the sill of the world" becomes an image for his daughter finding the needed expressions and surmounting the looming barriers in her life. The love between father and daughter is intensified by their concern for a fellow creature and strengthened by their common passion for writing. The "reins of love" ("All These Birds," T.T.W., p. 42) inspire the poet to creativity. He synthesizes these provocative events, past and present, into a new poetic experience.

"The Writer," which ends with a prayer for his daughter, suggests a broad parallel with Yeats's poem so titled. Wilbur's prayer, like Yeats's, serves also as a philosophical reminder to himself:

It is always a matter, my darling,
 Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
 What I wished you before, but harder.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

¹Opus Posthumous, p. 164.

²The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 128.

³Ibid., p. 129.

⁴Ibid., p. 129.

⁵The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, pp. 403-404.

⁶The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 25.

⁷See Hutton, p. 63.

⁸"The Bottles Become New, Too", in Responses, p. 219.

⁹Complete Poems of Marianne Moore (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 49.

¹⁰Wilbur's letter to Wai, August 8, 1980.

¹¹"The Bottles Become New, Too", in Responses, p. 219.

¹²"Round About a Poem of Housman's", Responses, p. 38.

¹³Wilbur's letter to Wai, August 8, 1980: "The painting does not exist; I invented it. However, Bazille did a great deal with striped or patterned clothing. A lady's blouse will sometimes become a flat pattern on the canvas, contrasting with the modelling and depth of other parts of the painting; the same thing happens with the trunks of some male bathers in a painting I once saw in the Fogg Museum at Harvard."

¹⁴The description of this painting is given in "Objects" (B.C., p. 23):

. . . there is that devout intransitive eye
Of Pieter de Hooch: see feinting from his plot of

CHAPTER V

MORAL FORTITUDE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

One of the jobs of poetry is to make the unbearable bearable, not by falsehood but by clear, precise confrontation. Even the most cheerful poet has to cope with pain as part of the human lot; what he shouldn't do is to complain, and dwell on his personal mischance.

--Richard Wilbur, an interview by
E. C. High and H. M. Ellison

Wilbur has won general acclaim for his craftsmanship; but his optimism bewilders numerous critics who presume that it is the poet's duty to articulate the horrors in the Twentieth Century. In his review of Things of This World, Hyam Plutzik asks, "How can he be so damnably good-natured in an abominable world?"¹ Theodore Holmes argues that the solution which Wilbur's poetry offers

to the dilemma of human existence can only be satisfactory for the privileged and unthinking 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.²

William Meredith argues an opposed position. He

maintains that to write about the human capacity for despair has become a fashion and that "even novelists and poets who are not gifted in despair sometimes feel impelled to fake it." Wilbur, according to Meredith, "explores the human capacity for happiness" and believes "that the universe is decent."³

Nevertheless, a sense of the world's imperfection recurs throughout Wilbur's poetry. His "first poems," for instance, "were written in answer to the inner and outer disorders of the Second World War."⁴ But he does not ignore the peculiar kind of beauty that emerges out of ruin. What the poet cherishes in "Potato" (B.C., pp. 8-9) is the plant's perseverance in surviving the hostile environment. And in "First Snow in Alsace" (B.C., p. 10), the poet shifts his focus from "Entangled railings," "crevassed lawn," "roofs of homes/Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged," and mutilated dead soldiers, to the pleasures that the villagers can still feel at the sight of falling snow. Wilbur's criticism of human impropriety is evidenced in "Shame" (A.P., pp. 33-34), wherein he denounces the "citizens'" insincere self-effacement. Despite their anonymity, "they lack the peace of mind of the truly humble"; for they secretly harbor a yearning for public recognition and admiration. In "The Puritans" (C., p. 24), Wilbur relentlessly condemns the hard-core

indecentcy of the religious hypocrites. By day they look for the body of a man whom they murdered the night before. The corpse has been "weighted with a stone" so that it will not rise to expose their crime. The poet is fully aware that this is a "maculate, cracked, askew,/Gay-pocked and potsherd world" ("Objects," B.C., pp. 23-24), but he maintains his steadfast faith in life.

1. The Fallen World

Wilbur's faith in life is two-fold. First, it is a belief that there is an ultimate order underlying the chaotic, mutable world.⁵ Second, it is a faith in man's god-like potential to impose an order on wilderness and to shape his own destiny. Wilbur's Weltanschauung is this-worldly: it seeks out ways of living happily in spite of the pressures of life in a fallen world.

In "For Ellen" (B.C., p. 50), the poet hopes or predicts that his daughter, when initiated into the blemishes of the world, will still maintain her love for it. The poem traces the spiritual growth of the girl from infancy to adulthood. In the maturing process, her certainty of her position in the universe will be constantly challenged by new knowledge of the world around her. Wilbur hopes that Ellen will not be crippled

by her new discoveries.

Ellen Dickinson is Wilbur's first child, aged about three or four⁶ when the poem was being written. The "ship" analogy (which recurs later in "The Writer") compares her going to sleep to the beginning of a spiritual journey. She is "embarked" for a voyage on the sea of mysteries in which anything that she knows well may turn into evil:

. . . there is nothing that you know
 So well, it may not monster in this sea.
 The vine leaves pat the screen. Viciously free,
 The wind vaults over the roof with Mister Crow
 To drop his crooked laughter in your night.

She voyages from the world of order and light to the heart of darkness.

Fear dissipates in the day, but reality is still a potential threat. The assaults on her innocence continue, as the "morning's cannonades of brightness come/
 To a little utter blueness in your eyes." "Blueness" refers to the color of a calm seascape and the sky that it reflects. Her serenity stands in contrast to the uncertainties of her voyage through darkness at night and to the onslaught of brightness in the morning. The implication of the blue color in the poem is also specified by the "Blue heal-all." The flower is associated with certainty, for it "breaks the pavingstone where you/Expect it." Ellen, "bestowing blue," tends to cling

to her uninitiated world of serenity and certainty, which heals whatever hurts she might have received from "Mister Crow" or "morning's cannonades." When surprised by the sight of a "comic cripple hurdling to his slum," she laughs--she does not understand his misery.

The word "but," which begins the last stanza, emphasizes an awakening in Ellen:

But sometime you will look at the lazy sun
Hammocked in clouds, dead-slumbering in the sky.
That casual fire will blister blue, and night
Will strand its fears . . .

By chance, the "casual fire" of the sun "will blister" her blue eyes or, metaphorically speaking, her vision of a serene, calm world. In this moment of revelation, Ellen can "strand" or weave her responses to the fright at night and surprises during the day into a pattern of meaning. Wilbur ends with a prediction--or his wish-fulfillment: Ellen's maturing vision of the world will not lead her to pessimism. She will bestow love, though of a "darker" nature, on the world in spite of its blemishes:

. . . then with a starker sight
And newer darker love, you will supply
The world of joy which never was begun.

The poet envisions that Ellen, with her "newer darker love," will change an idealized but non-existing world into a reality. The world of joy will exist for her because of her participation in it. The gravity of the

poem does not belong only to Ellen's maturation, but also to the poet's devotion to his daughter.

If Wilbur can hold out to Ellen the hope of gaining entrance into "the world of joy," in "Cottage Street, 1953" (M.R., p. 19) he remains helpless in the face of Sylvia Plath's fatal exclusion from that world. The poem is based on Wilbur's recollection of a rendezvous which took place ten years prior to Sylvia Plath's suicide, and fifteen years prior to Edna Ward's death. Wilbur notes:

Edna Ward was Mrs. Herbert D. Ward, my wife's mother. The poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was the daughter of one of Mrs. Ward's Wellesley friends. The recollection is probably composite, but it is true in essentials.

(M.R., p. 65)

The poem's initial word, "framed," suggests a setting of aesthetic composure. The poet arranges the various elements of a tea-ceremony into an artistic pattern to show the relationship and interaction of the participants. Four pairs of overlapped contrasts are set against each other and harmonize with each other.

Edna Ward, "Framed in her phoenix fire-screen" and serving tea on a "tray of Canton," opens the ceremony. The questions and answers are the ceremonials of the tea-ritual:

Framed in her phoenix fire-screen, Edna Ward
Bends to the tray of Canton, pouring tea
For frightened Mrs. Plath; then, turning toward
The pale, slumped daughter, and my wife, and me,

Asks if we would prefer it weak or strong.
 Will we have milk or lemon, she enquires?
 The visit seems already strained and long.
 Each in his turn, we tell her our desires.

Beneath the civil formalities, the reader can sense a tension which is suggested especially by the word "strained." The "genteel chat" can scarcely hide the fright expressed by Mrs. Plath and the mute accusations against life evidenced in her daughter:

How large is her refusal; and how slight
 The genteel chat whereby we recommend
 Life, of a summer afternoon, despite
 The brewing dusk which hints that it may end.

Another contrast is between Edna Ward and Sylvia Plath. Whereas Edna Ward demonstrates "grace and courage," Sylvia Plath is "pale" and "slumped." "Love," the only italicized word in the poem, characterizes Mrs. Ward's attitude towards existence. She is called by love to the things and people of this world. Her life of "eight-and-eighty summers," therefore, "permit[s] no tears." In contrast, Sylvia Plath is "unjust" to the people and the world around her. In an interview, Wilbur explains the several implications of the adjective "unjust":

She was unjust because a sick and prejudiced perception of things is--well, that's the limitation on the usefulness of her poetry to any reader, I think. . . . She's all wrapped up in herself and her feelings about her children, and herself as a writer, and her fantasies about her dead father, and her arbitrary connections between her dead father and her husband. I don't suppose we need to know that her father was not a Nazi in order to read

that poem ["Daddy"] rightly, or do we? In any case, she's rather unjust to him. She's certainly unjust to her mother.⁷

The choice of Edna Ward as a foil to Plath, however, does not seem very successful. The details given in the poem do not convincingly portray her as a person of "grace and courage." I share Calvin Bedient's feeling that Wilbur is aggrandizing Mrs. Ward at the expense of Sylvia Plath: "Plath may not look noble compared to Edna Ward--after all, few could as she is here aggrandized."⁸

The most vital conflict, however, pivots upon the mute dialogue between the suicidal poetess and "the published poet in his happiness." His "office" is to "exemplify" his faith in life, whereas she is "condemned to live" and "wishes to die." Helpless, he looks at her, whom he is assigned to "cheer." This feeling of helplessness has haunted him for about two decades and has become a motivation for poetry. He compares himself to "a stupid life-guard," and Plath to a victim "immensely drowned" and "Swept to his shallows by the tide." The "tide" can be interpreted as the darker side of life in general, of which the poet himself is also conscious. He feels "stupid" and "ashamed" because he is powerless to contradict her accusations, or to give her any help that she can use. But he is only "half-ashamed," for Plath is partly responsible for her own drowning. She has lost

her equilibrium and indulges in her negations of life. Her "eyes of pearls," staring "through water," express her resentment. The image of "pearls" is ultimately adapted from The Tempest, but more directly from "Lady Lazarus," in which Plath likens her resurrection to a strip-tease. She accuses those who thrive upon her painful performance of greed:

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.⁹

The pearls are signs of the grotesque pain of her resurrection. And the water image recalls a passage in "The Burnt-out Spa," where Plath sees her reflection on the water as a "drowned" person buried in a coffin-like network of cat-tails:

Leaning over, I encounter one
Blue and improbable person

Framed in a basketwork of cat-tails.
O she is gracious and austere,
Seated beneath the toneless water!¹⁰

Although she says emphatically and repeatedly, "It is not I, it is not I,"¹¹ the "improbable person" is a projection of her wish-fulfillment. To her, grace and courage are attainable only in, or through, death.

The fourth conflict is between Wilbur's aesthetic stance and that of Plath. Wilbur wittily denounces the

so-called confessional poets in "Flippancies," a poem which is included also in the volume The Mind-Reader (p. 43):

If fictive music fails your lyre, confess--
 Though not, of course, to any happiness.
 So it be tristful, tell us what you choose:
 Hangover, Nixon on the TV news,
 God's death, the memory of your rocking-horse,
 Entropy, housework, Buchenwald, divorce,
 Those damned flamingoes in your neighbor's yard . . .
 All hangs together if you take it hard.

Although "Cottage Street, 1953" is autobiographical, as most confessional poetry is, Wilbur is not complaining about the hopelessness of the situation. He maintains a delicate balance of involvement and detachment; he is sensitive to Sylvia Plath's predicament but distances himself from her death-prone compulsion. He points out both her merits and flaws:

. . . Sylvia who, condemned to live,
 Shall study for a decade, as she must,
 To state at last her brilliant negative
 In poems free and helpless and unjust.

Calvin Bedient, who ignores the adjective "brilliant," accuses Wilbur of attacking Plath's "Achilles' heel while hardly noticing the winged foot."¹² On the contrary, the paradox, "brilliant negative," precisely stresses the fact that her talent is inseparable from her vulnerability and limitations. In defence of himself, Wilbur told his interviewers:

Let the record show that I said brilliant
 I suppose she was freed by the onset of her
 desperate condition of mind to be brilliant in the

way the poems of Ariel are brilliant. At the same time, she was help~~less~~ because it required that condition of mind to bring on those poems.¹³

"Well, I really think Sylvia Plath's latter [sic] poems," he continued, "when unfortunately she was at her best, were crazy, and that, whatever virtues they have, they have that limitation."¹⁴ His comments show that, despite his understanding of man's predicament in general and Plath's predicament in particular, Wilbur has little sympathy with her negative attitude towards the fallen world.

2. Mutability and Mortality

Wilbur tries to define the territory man is allowed to explore and the limitations he has to accept in a fallen world. While man is engaged in his pursuit of life's pleasures, time robs him of youth and vitality. The passing of time has prompted Wilbur to write a number of carpe diem poems--"La Rose des Vents," "Sunlight Is Imagination," "Ballade for the Duke of Orléans," and "Running," for example. The poet is concerned with man's destiny in a mutable world, in which he lives and dies. An assortment of poems on death testify to Wilbur's preoccupation with mortality: "Lightness," "Then," "In the Elegy Season," "Years-End," "Lament," "The Death of a Toad," "To an American Poet Just Dead," "In a Churchyard,"

"Walking to Sleep," and "For Dudley."

Despite the inevitability of death, man indulges in illusions of personal immortality on earth. In this sense, too, we are all citizens of Pompeii:

. . . And at Pompeii

The little dog lay curled and did not rise
But slept the deeper as the ashes rose
And found the people incomplete, and froze
The random hands, the loose unready eyes
Of men expecting yet another sun
To do the shapely thing they had not done.

("Years-End," C., p. 23)

The poet himself seeks consolation in the ceaseless natural cycle of decay and regeneration:

The leaf first learned of years
One not forgotten fall;
Of lineage now, and loss
These latter singers tell,
Of a year when birds now still
Were all one choiring call
Till the unreturning leaves
Imperishably fell.

("Then," C., p. 3)

In such lines, Wilbur expresses his faith in a reconciliation of personal death and general immortality. The paradox is that the fallen leaves themselves will never return, but their act of falling represents an "imperishable" seasonal cycle.

The theme of transience and the motif of thirst overlap each other in "Ballade for the Duke of Orléans" (A.P., pp. 45-46). The Duke "offered a prize at Blois,

circa 1457, for the best ballade employing the line 'Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine.'" Life and satisfaction seem to exclude each other. Man's insatiable thirst for the unattainable, for example, immortality, only results in dissatisfaction and frustration. Fascinated by the wisdom expressed in the Duke's line, and in a literary defiance of time, the poet writes the Ballade for the contest given five centuries ago.

Wilbur skillfully adjusts his diction to the formalities of a ballade without sacrificing the fluency and coherence of his argument. Stanzaic uniformity and the recurrence of the "a," "b," and "c" rhymes contribute to the unity and continuity of the poem. Each stanza is spoken by a different speaker, telling a different story, and each story is an illustration of the theme expressed by the refrain.

The first speaker is a fisherman, who quests for fulfillment beyond his catch:

Flailed from the heart of water in a bow,
 He took the falling fly; my line went taut;
 Foam was in uproar where he drove below;
 In spangling air I fought him and was fought.
 Then, wearied to the shallows, he was caught,
 Gasp'd in the net, lay still and stony-eyed.
 It was no fading iris I had sought.
I die of thirst, here at the fountain-side.

The fisherman catches a rainbow trout--a "stony-eyed," dead fish--but he does not catch the immortal rainbow he has sought. He is disappointed because, the fish

having been caught, the exhilaration and pleasure of his struggle with a superhuman opponent vanish. The poem "The Giaour and the Pacha" (B.C., p. 15) presents a similar situation. The Giaour finds that the purpose of his life terminates at the moment when he defeats his enemy. Man is never capable of contentment. "We are creatures of infinite hankering," Wilbur maintains, "and therefore we are never satisfied, although we may dream of reaching such a condition."¹⁵ He selects numerous examples to illustrate his statement:

A man who solves a crossword puzzle, or fills the last gap in his stamp collection, may feel a fleeting complacency, but then there will be a letdown, and he will ask himself why he has given such time and thought to so slight a thing. Or if the goal achieved does not disappoint us by its triviality, it is likely to appall us by the revelation that we have not understood our own desires. That is what happens in all those fairy stories where the hero is given three wishes, and it happens in life as well. Robert Penn Warren, in his essay on Sam Houston, tells an astonishing thing; he tells how Houston, at the battle of San Jacinto, saw his officers riding up with four hundred prisoners; how he knew by that that Santa Anna was utterly beaten, and that he, Sam Houston, would soon realize his ambition to be president of a vast southwestern republic; and how, at that moment of victory, instead of rejoicing, Houston cried out, "Have I a friend in this world?" It is a strange story and an enigmatic cry, but I think that we would all explain it in the same way; we would guess that Houston, in the hour of his triumph, was suddenly free to know how his bitter ambition had estranged him from other men, and how the gaining of his goal would mean a lifetime of lonely eminence.¹⁶

Neither is Odysseus satisfied with his achievements.

Wilbur's hero in the second stanza is a composite of the portraits given by Homer, Dante, and Tennyson:

Down in the harbor's flow and counter-flow
 I left my ships with hopes and heroes fraught.
 Ten times more golden than the sun could show,
 Calypso gave the darkness I besought.
 Oh, but her fleecy touch was dearly bought:
 All spent, I wakened by my only bride,
 Beside whom every vision is but nought,
And die of thirst, here at the fountain-side.

The woes of Odysseus recall comparable passages in Dante's Inferno and Tennyson's poem "Ulysses." In Dante's Inferno, Odysseus confesses:

Nor tender love of son, nor pity for
 my aged father, nor affection due
 that should have cheered Penelope, o'erborne
 The ardour that was in me to pursue
 experience of the world, that I might be
 in human vices versed and virtue too . . .¹⁷

Tennyson's Ulysses is equally restless. He feels stifled staying in Ithaca with his "aged" Penelope and ruling "a savage race":

It little profits that an idle king,
 By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
 Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
 Unequal laws unto a savage race,
 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
 I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
 Life to the lees. . . .¹⁸

Wilbur's Odysseus explains the cause of his frustration in terms of gain and loss. What Odysseus has gained is "the darkness" that Calypso gave him. Her "golden" darkness represents a duality of enlightenment and bewilderment. Being a goddess, Calypso introduces him to a new privileged level of knowledge. But Odysseus

has paid "dearly" for "her fleecy touch": his strength is "all spent." When restored to his human status, he finds that "every vision is but nought." He fails to appreciate what he is entitled to: a kingdom and a faithful wife. Wilbur observes that man craves

for more life, for new life, for the compassing of all possibilities--for "life piled on life," as Tennyson's Ulysses said. We are all moved by that craving, even the laziest of us, and we value human discontent because of what it has driven men to accomplish; nevertheless, there are times when we weary of the fact that there is no such thing as a finished man, and wish that it were in us to rest and be satisfied.¹⁹

Odysseus is a perpetual quester, whose aspirations forever surpass his capabilities.

The last speaker in the Ballade is the poet himself. With an amalgamated list of examples, the poet shows that man can never "cry Nunc dimittis, and die happy."²⁰ For illustration, he refers to the past and the present, to both Classical and Eastern civilizations:

Where does that Plenty dwell, I'd like to know,
Which fathered poor Desire, as Plato taught?
Out on the real and endless waters go
Conquistador and stubborn Argonaut.
Where Buddha bathed, the golden bowl he brought
Gilded the stream, but stalled its living tide.
The sunlight withers as the verse is wrought.
I die of thirst, here at the fountain-side.

He begins his monologue with a question, suggesting his doubt about the existence of any attainable form of contentment. The reference to Plato is from the Symposium. At a banquet in the house of Agathon, the guests make

speeches in honor of love. Socrates relates a dialogue between him and Diotima, a prophetess of Mantinea, concerning the parentage of Eros:

"And who," I said, "was his [love's] father, and who his mother?" "The tale," she said, "will take time; nevertheless I will tell you. On the day when Aphrodite was born there was a feast of all the gods, among them the god Poros or Plenty, who is the son of Metis or Sagacity. When the feast was over, Penia or Poverty . . . came about the doors to beg. Now Plenty, who was the worse for nectar (there was no wine in those days), went into the garden of Zeus and fell into a heavy sleep; and Poverty considering that for her there was no plenty, plotted to have a child by him, and accordingly she lay down at his side and conceived Love, who partly because he is naturally a lover of the beautiful, and because Aphrodite is herself beautiful, and also because he was begotten during her birthday feast, is her follower and attendant.²¹

Eros is defined as "love of a thing, desire for it."²²

Anyone who is totally lacking in wisdom and fairness would have never desired them. Poverty, conscious of her want and wretchedness, seeks happiness through the possession of Plenty. She succeeds and begets Eros. Eros inherits the qualities of both of his parents. He partakes of the resources of his father and desires perpetual possession of the good, or simply immortality, through rebirth. In Wilbur's Ballade, Plenty is a form of absolute happiness, for which man strives. Plenty "fathered poor Desire" but is free from it. The poet would like to know where this god of complete contentment

dwells and wonders if he is an attainable reality. The answer is negative. Wilbur observes that

the self which desires a thing is not the self which at last possesses that thing. As one approaches any goal, . . . desire commences to look beyond. Even as I delighted in my beginner's acquaintance with the Inferno, I was revising my despair and saying to myself, "You may very well die without ever having read Dante properly; and what's more, you know nothing about grand opera."²³

The subsequent allusions in the third stanza go on to show that man's aspirations forever surpass what he has achieved. The conquest of the Conquistadors and the expeditions of the Argonauts--archetypes of man's "endless" quest for more abundant life--are appropriately described in the present tense. The Argosy is comparable to the Odyssey. Calypso's "golden" darkness and her "fleecy touch" undoubtedly are intended to be a parallel to the "Golden Fleece." Whereas Odysseus is frustrated with the limitations of a mortal wife, Jason is frightened by the superhuman powers of Medea and later abandons her for Creusa of Corinth.

The story of Buddha and his golden bowl is another illustration of man's quest for fulfillment:

He came to a village. Now in that village there was a woman whose name was Sujātā. She had been warned in a dream that the one who was to become Buddha would come that way and that she was to be ready to bestow a gift of food upon him. And so when Gotama came into that village Sujātā had milk and rice of the purest kinds ready for him, and she gave him this food in a golden

bowl. Gotama rejoiced in the readiness with which the gift was offered, in the purity of the food, and the fineness of the vessel in which it was given. He blessed Sujātā. He ate the food and thereafter he bathed in the river. And when he placed it in the water the golden bowl floated up the stream. Thereupon a great joy possessed Gotama; the bowl floating up the stream was, he knew, a sign given him that he would soon attain Enlightenment.²⁴

The allusion to the above legend has several implied meanings in the context of Wilbur's Ballade. The golden bowl bestows its beatitude upon the stream; but floating against the current, the bowl obstructs the flow of the "living tide." Similarly, when the poet transforms the living reality into art, he changes dynamic transience into stasis.

The golden bowl is also a symbol of perfection and an embodiment of Sujātā's purest kind of love for Gotama. This interpretation reminds the reader of William Blake's famous question in "Thel's Motto": "Can wisdom be put in a silver rod,/Or love in a golden bowl?"²⁵ The answer is negative, for wisdom and love are beyond the confinements of any form. The golden bowl which confines love only "stall[s] its spontaneity. Life is filled with paradoxes. In the very act of striving for fulfillment, the poet realizes that he has aged, has moved closer to death: "The sunlight withers as the verse is wrought."

Defeated by the unalterable human condition into which man is born, the poet concludes that the search for

contentment is an infinite process. Man is endowed simultaneously with potentialities to succeed and with a propensity to despair. Moreover, he feels deprived by certain impersonal forces, especially mutability and mortality, which are beyond his control. As he would not be satisfied with the award, the poet asks the Duke to keep his prize in the "Envoi":

Duke, keep your coin. All men are born distraught,
And will not for the world be satisfied.
Whether we live in fact, or but in thought,
We die of thirst, here at the fountain-side.

Wilbur finds one solution to this human predicament in Emily Dickinson's poetry. In his article on her, "Sumptuous Destitution," Wilbur comments:

In her inner life, as well, she came to keep the world's images, even the images of things passionately desired, at the remove which renunciation makes; and her poetry at its most mature continually proclaims that to lose or forgo what we desire is somehow to gain.²⁶

Wilbur selects "Undue Significance a starving man attaches" and "Success is counted sweetest" for illustration:

In the first of these two poems I have read, it was possible to imagine the poet as saying that a starving man's visions of food are but wish fulfillments, and hence illusory; but the second poem assures us of the contrary--assures us that food, or victory, or any other good thing is best comprehended by the eye of desire from the vantage of privation.²⁷

Happiness is a balance between the appreciation of the earth's wealth and the recognition of its finitude.

The disappointment of the fisherman, Odysseus, and the poet--like that of the "tall camels" in "A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness," the olive trees in "Grasse: the Olive Trees," and Ponce de Leon in "Sunlight Is Imagination"--is the result of their inability to maintain this balance.

In "Running" (W.S., pp. 26-29), the poet uses his personal growth and decay to exemplify the human condition in general. The three divisions of the poem correspond to the three different stages of the poet's life: boyhood, young manhood, and middle age. The place names also contribute biographical touches to the poem. Under the life-giving and life-wasting sun, the poet ages and withers in the very process of maturation.

The act of running, which recurs in all three sections, is symbolic of vital participation in life. In the first section, the speaker recalls his younger self playing "prisoner's base" in North Caldwell, New Jersey. The twelve-year-old runner took pride in his agility and excellence. He leapt and bounced like a colt, running for freedom and running from imprisonment. His running performance is happiness in action. This section is filled with verbs and phrases which denote brisk, speedy movements:

I ran with whacking keds
Down the cart-road past Rickard's place,
And where it dropped beside the tractor-sheds

Leapt out into the air above a blurred
 Terrain, through jolted light,
 Took two hard lopes, and at the third
 Spanked off a hummock-side exactly right,

And made the turn, and with delighted strain
 Sprinted across the flat
 By the bull-pen, and up the lane.

The linguistic grace of the mature, skillful poet portrays
 the physical, instinctive grace of his younger self.

The adverb "exactly" suggests his own approval of the
 perfection he achieved. This kind of pride is endorsed
 by the poet himself. Wilbur told his interviewer:

It is not just that I have made a perfectly
 disciplined physical gesture, and I congratulate
 myself on that; although that part of it is all
 right. I think I find no objection, really
 to self-love of that kind. I remember how
 Gerard Manley Hopkins, at a cricket match, heard
 a Scotsman who was batting very well say under
 his breath, "Ah, sweet myself." It seems to me
 it is understandable and quite all right to be
 pleased if some discipline you've learned is
 working well. It is mirroring the discipline
 and not yourself.²⁸

Yet this kind of happiness, physically experienced in his
 boyhood, has become a memory only: "Thinking of happiness,
 I think of that."

The second episode takes place on April 19,
 Patriots' Day, a legal holiday in Maine and Massachusetts,
 to celebrate the anniversary of the battles of Lexington
 and Concord in 1775. The speaker has become a young
 father. The "noble day" is an ironic contrast to the
 speaker's ignoble passivity. Most of the actions that

he participates in are either stationary or passive. He waits for the Marathon runners to pass, and he "litter[s] the grass." His restlessness for action is "appeased by soft/Drinks and tobacco." He and his son are "let out/Of school and office to be put to shame." The phrase "let out" suggests that they are freed from imprisonment temporarily on this occasion. In a period of two decades, the speaker has abandoned his running from imprisonment and let himself be ensnared by physical inertia. His need for action is vicariously fulfilled by the Boston Marathon runners, especially "Our champion Kelley, who would win again,/Rocked in his will, at rest within his run." At the end of the second section, the reader realizes that the poet is "put to shame" by these runners. As they are sweeping by, the poet feels the cruelty of their pace, which reminds him of his inertia. And Kelley, "stamping on the sun," has defied the Master of Time; his running is a timeless exemplum. The champion has realized the dreams that Wilbur, the boy, pursued and Wilbur, the young father, has abandoned. A sense of remorse and loss prevails in this section.

The last anecdote takes place in the present at Dodwells Road, Cummington, Massachusetts. The vigor "confined" in the more stylized and restricted form of the first two stanzas slackens in the third, in which

the lines are unrhymed and the syntax is more relaxed. The tempo of the verse, and of the runner, slows down to that of "walking," "jogging," and "strolling." The speaker "jog[s] up out of the woods/To the crown of the road"; and probably breathless, "slow[s] to a swagger there." Despite the physical strain, he is glad that his senses are alert, alive to the natural surroundings. He is pleased with his sensitivity to "The wind harsh and cool to my throat," and "A good ache in my rib-cage." He consoles himself: "Still I am part of that great going."

Yet his preoccupation with his aging and mortality is evident and is conveyed through a contrast of landscapes. He is part of the worn-out landscape in which the sun is "frazzled," the "tree heads" are "blown," and the "pasture" is "exhausted." Juxtaposed with this withering world are the fields yielding to new growths of aspen and pine, the lively racing of the two boys, the dodging of the dog, the bluster of the grass, and the flight of the pheasant. He regrets having missed the opportunity of exploring fully the richness of life in its "true season," possibly his early adulthood. The pursuit of such fulfillment was evidenced in his childhood, but was abandoned in his young manhood. Nightly, his thoughts "turn in" at the entrance to this expanse of knowledge which is "Never now to be charted." Yet he seeks

consolation in the very sight which sharpens his awareness of the passage of time: the perpetual succession of human life. He "make[s] a clean gift of [his] young running/To the two boys who break into view." He insists: "You, whoever you are,/If you want to walk with me you must step lively." The poem conveys the speaker's acceptance of the limitations placed upon man by the inevitable disintegrative process. Nevertheless, the poet's assertion of his non-vacillating devotion to life makes his recognition of man's mortality more poignant.

Death is a universal puzzle that no one has solved. And Wilbur does not attempt to solve it. Meditating among the tombstones, the poet in "In a Churchyard" (W.S., pp. 13-15) recalls Gray's response to a similar landscape in his poem "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard." Gray describes a solitary speaker watching nightfall and listening to the curfew tolling its last knell. Suddenly, he is dominated by an absence of light and noise. Gray lets his fantasy go beyond the range of human senses and knowledge to a state of emotional excitement, and he composes "A music innocent of time and sound." In an atmosphere permeated by the presence of death, Gray thinks of immortality though he is aware of the futility of man's effort to outlive death.

Wilbur infuses images from Gray's poem with new meanings. The opening stanzas of Wilbur's poem refer specifically to the following lines by Gray:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.²⁹

Gray celebrates unrecognized talents; he maintains that the obscure villagers buried in the country churchyard could have been Miltons and Cromwells if they had been given a chance to prove their potentialities. To Wilbur, Gray's assumptions are "Void notions proper to a buried head":

That flower unseen, that gem of purest ray,
Bright thoughts uncut by men:
Strange that you need but speak them, Thomas Gray,
And the mind skips and dives beyond its ken,

Finding at once the wild supposed bloom,
Or in the imagined cave
Some pulse of crystal staving off the gloom
As covertly as phosphorus in a grave.

Yet sensory deprivation leads Wilbur to a poetic experience similar to that of Gray. He deserts observable reality and "balked imminence/Of uncommitted sound" for "Some pulseless clangor," or, in Keats's words, "ditties of no tone."³⁰ The unheard music "charm[s] us to forget" the horror of death and to long for fulfillment in death. The imminence of death liberates a vision of Charon's boat, equipped with modern facilities, transporting the fortunate dead across the River Styx to the Elysian fields:

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

 So memory and expectation set
 Some pulseless clangor free
 Of circumstance . . .

At the end of the poem, Wilbur is called back from this fantasized realm to the sensible objects by "a mauled boom." He finds that the "summons" of an actual bell, which reminds him of "the mystery of things," is "far more strange/Than any stroke unheard." His sensory response to the light of "the earliest-blooming star," to "The buzz of prayer," and to "The scent of grass" restores his relationship with this world and reaffirms his love for its things. Wilbur does not try to diminish the horror of death. He rejects the fantasy of an afterlife in favor of involvement in this-worldly existence.

3. Personal Equilibrium

Wilbur's heroes and heroines are mostly common people who manifest personal stability in the presence of danger or death. They are not disheartened by the human condition in which man is trapped. Theodore Holmes unfairly alleges that Wilbur never offers any moral principles by which a decent life may be led:

They [Wilbur's poems] are for the most part a spoof played on the reader's legitimate concern for

something to put in place of the old attachments which they wipe away. As admirable as this view of human experience may be, the poems supply no deeper resource in understanding by which life may be led with dignity and compassion for our frailties.³¹

A less impatient reader of the poems would come to a different conclusion. The moral fortitude that Wilbur upholds is embodied by, for example, the driftwood which endures quietly and is refined by challenges analogous to the constant assaults on human lives ("Driftwood," C., pp. 41-42). Bruna Sandoval in "A Plain Song for Comadre" (T.T.W., p. 16) is exalted for the reverence she shows for her humble duties. Her devotion in turn sanctifies her daily chores. Aunt Virginia in "Lightness" (B.C., p. 49) is admirable because of her dignity and calmness in the presence of imminent death. And the poem "Superiorities" (B.C., p. 33) celebrates the courage of Malachy and Phipps who stay on shipdeck to face a storm. They are

. . . far superior to those
Huddled below with wives and buddies,
Comforting, caring, sharing pills,
Prayers and other proper studies.

In "C Minor" (M.R., pp. 25-26), Wilbur concisely states his opinion on how life should be led: "There is nothing to do with a day except to live it." Apparently the poet is talking to his wife, and expressing his view on listening to "Beethoven during breakfast," rather than at some more suitable hour. The sense of inappropriateness

is reinforced by the juxtaposition of the "hollow pluckings" of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and "bran-flakes" cracking "in the cereal-bowl"; the poet prefers that each day play its own music. Life is to be lived, and the purpose of art is to organize experience, not to regiment it. It is inhibiting and confining to have a piece of art-- "an overture," for example--forestating an experience that a person has not yet had.

The poem is filled with familiar human experiences: scanning the news, "hoeing in the garden plot," and pacing "through too-familiar rooms." And common impressions abound: "pecker-knocks/In the sugar bush," "the rancor of a jay," and "the knitting of light in fennel-plumes." The poet seems to stress the importance of an unprogrammed daily routine. The detailed descriptions of the supposedly insignificant everyday occurrences highlight their latent significance. Each is an integral part to be woven into an artistic pattern.

The list of daily experiences shows that life is filled with opposites: sadness and joy, disappointment and satisfaction, pain and pleasure, loneliness and consolation, suffering and endurance, and coldness and warmth. The news may be "fortunate" or "sad." Gardening is a joy,³² but rain may fall and keep the poet indoors. A forecast of these happenings does not help to change one's

fate or avert one's misfortune:

The day's work will be disappointing or not,
 Giving at least some pleasure in taking pains.
 One of us, hoeing in the garden plot
 (Unless, of course, it rains)

May rejoice at the knitting of light in fennel-plumes
 And dew like mercury on cabbage-hide,
 Or rise and pace through too-familiar rooms,
 Balked and dissatisfied.

Shall a plate be broken? A new thing understood?
 Shall we be lonely, and by love consoled?
 What shall I whistle, splitting the kindling-wood?
 Shall the night-wind be cold?

How should I know? And even if we were fated
 Hugely to suffer, grandly to endure,
 It would not help to hear it all fore-stated
 As in an overture.

The idea of fate again recalls Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, whose opening theme has been called "Fate knocking at the door." Wilbur does not want his fate foretold or predesigned. Each day should be an adventure: "let the day/Begin at hazard," he advises. Uncertainty allows adventures, which enrich life with rewarding surprises and unforeseeable discoveries of the sort Wallace Stevens extols in his poem "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man":

It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
 Has any chance to mate his life with life
 That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
 That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.³³

The Sleight-of-Hand man discovers order and joy in life because he allows things to "Occur as they occur."³⁴ For Wilbur, as for Stevens, the most precious experiences are

"into masts" or "milled into/Oar and plank," then "fretted by the waves'/Ever surpassing stress," and finally dumped and slewed by breakers "On the glass verge of the land." The driftwood, however, will neither "pitch in and drown" nor "stand on the dry land/Crying deserted in thirst from the dunes of privacy." "Finely involved" in but "Never dissolved" by the "deep subsumption" of the sea, these relics maintain the difficult balance between "their singleness" and "the great generality of waters." Wilbur will pledge allegiance only to the kingship demonstrated in the steadfast dedication to life by the driftwood. Its royalty is not inherited but "earned."

One may very well argue that the selection of driftwood as an image of moral fortitude is unfortunate: driftwood is totally passive, both in its trials and its survivals, and can hardly be said to have either will or choice. Yet Wilbur has used driftwood quite effectively as a metaphor of the attributes that he exalts and as a counter-image against ideas, political affiliations especially, that he disapproves of. Driftwood endures both environmental forces and human impositions. Its "singleness" stays afloat "in all that deep subsumption." It maintains its independence amid "dry abdications" and "damp complicities"--those who have abandoned themselves to political weathers. In spite of "the

lathe of all the seas," the pieces of driftwood "have saved . . . all their dense/Ingenerate grain."

The attribute that Wilbur celebrates in "Lightness" (B.C., p. 49) is the virtue after which the poem is named: "Triumph of lightness! Legerity begs no/Quarter." Legerity is embodied in three different forms in the poem: the physical nimbleness of the "birdsnest," the grace of Aunt Virginia, and the dexterity of the poet. The creative stimulation for the poem is the same which motivates "The Writer"--"it's that two ideas, two images come together, and then you've got something to work with," Wilbur told his interviewers.³⁹ A scene that the poet witnessed recently or, more precisely, "this morning," transports him to the past when Aunt Virginia gracefully lived in the presence of impending death. It is the lightness of the birdsnest that saves it from a catastrophe, and it is Aunt Virginia's serenity that saves her from misery.

A birdsnest "Of interlaid daintiest timber," though "lifted-and-left in the midst of the air" by a "brute gust," gently descends from "the palm of the high-/Most bough of an elm" and lands safely, with the eggs unbroken, "On a mesa of strenuous grass." Its triumph over the gravitational attraction--the pull towards the "grave"--reminds the reader of a similar scene in Gerard

Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover," the style of which Wilbur undoubtedly imitates. Both scenes are witnessed "this morning"--a fleeting moment and a temporal circumstance--but they have a universal application. Whereas the tone of Hopkins' poem is pious and serious, Wilbur's is light and witty. The hyphenated words in Hopkins' poem contribute to the gravity of the verse; those in Wilbur's poem--"very-blue-eyed," for example--lend to the lightness of the lines. Yet the subject matter of Wilbur's poem is like that of Hopkins', basically serious. Hopkins reflects on the splendor of the Creator expressed by the magnificent flight of a windhover; Wilbur contemplates the defeat of death by the acrobatics of the dainty birdsnest. The falcon and the birdsnest show equal aplomb in their mid-air performance. The "dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon"

. . . rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend:
 the hurl and gliding
 Rebuffed the big wind. . . .⁴⁰

And the birdsnest

. . . began the chute
 Down forty fell feet toward stone and root
 With a drift and a sampan spin, and gripped
 Loosely its fineshelled life; now viciously tipped
 By a ripple of air, with an acrobat's quick not-quite-
 Lost, dipped lower to whirl upright;
 Then, with a straight-down settling, it
 Descended into sunshine, and, with a hushed touch, lit
 On a mesa of strenuous grass. . . .

Both the falcon and the birdsnest defeat the "brute" wind,

but by different means. With Hopkins, it is a clash between two strong forces, and the stronger wins: the falcon rides on top of the wind. With Wilbur, it is the weaker that triumphs over the unbeatable natural forces by riding with the wind. Hopkins' poem is a hymn "To Christ our Lord"; Wilbur's is a tribute to a humble nest of unhatched eggs. They are made holy by the equilibrium they maintain in danger. The nest is compared to a "chalice," and the eggs are hailed as "risk-hallowed eggs."

The miraculous descent of the nest is a parallel to the spiritual valor of Aunt Virginia. Like the "risk-hallowed eggs," she remains calm in spite of the brutality of sickness and death. Other parallels include the nickname "Birdie" that her husband gives her, and the comparison of her to a gull which "takes a fish at the flash of his side." As the birdsnest is contrasted with the violent wind and the catastrophic fall, Aunt Virginia is a foil to "Her great/Heavy husband" and "the others, the strong, the involved, in-the-swim." She is supposed to be the one to be pitied; yet being spiritually superior to her sympathizers, she consoles them instead. She parries their pity

. . . with very-blue-eyed
 Attention, and giggled and patted their hands when
 they tried
 To do-something-for-her . . .

Aunt Virginia is a more powerful and convincing contrast to Sylvia Plath than Edna Ward is. Whereas Plath wants to die but is condemned to live, Aunt Virginia continues to live though she is condemned to die. The paradoxes of "gay shroud" and "gladly dying" imply that she transcends the horror of death by being cheerful. She does not indulge in fantasies of an afterlife, but faces reality with courage. Although death shrouds her, she lives at the height of her life, sitting "in the heart of her days/And watch[ing] with a look of peculiar praise."

Faith and courage, in a life filled with traps and horror, are consistently recommended by Wilbur throughout his poetry, from The Beautiful Changes to Walking to Sleep and to The Mind-Reader. The moral implications of "Lightness" foreshadow similar advice given in "Walking to Sleep" and "C Minor," for example. Aunt Virginia is an exemplum of Wilbur's epigram: "There is nothing to do with a day except to live it" ("C Minor," M.R., p. 26). Undisturbed by impending death, her serenity reflects that of Vishnu "On whose calm face all images whatever/Lay clear, unfathomed, taken as they came" ("Walking to Sleep," W.S., p. 58). With "one hand lightly laid on a fatal door," she is in contact with both worlds--life and death--and takes each as it comes.

Wilbur is genuinely saddened by mutability and mortality, but he does not seem to be imaginatively held by the kind of terrifying reality that Robert Frost portrays in "Design," "Out, Out--," and "Acquainted with the Night," for example. Wilbur's stoicism and equilibrium are admirable, but he has not given all readers the impression of having struggled to achieve them. His faith in an ultimate order sometimes results in an absence of the vital energy born from an all-out contention with chaos.

Wilbur's temperament does not allow him the ferocity that has enabled poets like Robert Lowell to articulate convincingly the dislocations of the Twentieth Century. In "On the Marginal Way" (W.S., p. 7), Wilbur comes very close to confronting tragedy, yet he dismisses it with an affirmative statement:

Though, high above the shore
On someone's porch, spread wings of newsprint flap
The tidings of some dirty war,
It is a perfect day.

His occasional readiness to dismiss the malaise of his times leaves the reader wondering if the poet's optimism might be a little forced. The reader does not suspect the poet's honesty and seriousness as regards his faith and the ideas he expresses, but he may sometimes miss a sense of human tragedy. Generally speaking, Wilbur's

limitations are his temperamental peculiarities, which he can hardly be expected to transcend consistently. Most likely, Wilbur would assent to and repudiate simultaneously these critical remarks with grace and wit, as he did in response to the three critics at the symposium on "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World":

My best poems seem to me to account somehow for my whole experience and to engage my whole nature. When sympathetic critics find what seems to me a passionate poem merely "amiable," or are troubled by a sense of "fastidiousness or remoteness," I hardly know what I can sensibly say. I must concede the possibility, as all must, that I am not a "whole soul." I must also wonder whether my poetry may not be too indirect for its emotion to transpire. 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.⁴¹

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

¹Hyam Plutzik, "Recent Poetry", Yale Review, New Series, XLVI (December 1956), 296.

²Theodore Holmes, "A Prophet without a Prophecy", Part I of "Wilbur's New Book: Two Views", Poetry, C (April, 1962), 38.

³William Meredith, "A Note on Richard Wilbur", Part II of "Wilbur's New Book: Two Views", Poetry, C (April 1962), 40.

⁴"On My Own Work", Responses, p. 118.

⁵See Stitt, p. 86. Wilbur said: "I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy, that the energy tends to take pattern and shape, and that the ultimate character of things is comely and good."

⁶Wilbur's letter to Wai, August 8, 1980: "it would have been 1946 or 1947 [when the poem was being written]; she [Ellen] was born on October 1, 1943."

⁷Part II of "The Art of Poetry: Two Interviews with Richard Wilbur", eds. E. C. High and H. M. Ellison, Paris Review, No. 72 (Winter 1977), pp. 90-91.

⁸Calvin Bedient, Review of Richard Wilbur's "The Mind-Reader", New Republic, CLXXIV (June 5, 1976), 21.

⁹Sylvia Plath, Ariel (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 7.

¹⁰Sylvia Plath, The Colossus (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 78.

¹¹Ibid., p. 78.

¹²Bedient, p. 21

¹³See High and Ellison, p. 90.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 91

¹⁵"A Speech at a Ceremony", Responses, p. 72.
 Wilbur states: "This one [commencement address] was given at Washington University, in Saint Louis, in the spring of 1964, and was published in the Washington University Magazine that summer" (Responses, p. 67).

¹⁶Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁷Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. Melville B. Anderson (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), Inferno xxvi, ll. 94-99, p. 142.

¹⁸Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses", The Poetical Works of Tennyson, ed. G. Robert Stange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), p. 88.

¹⁹"A Speech at a Ceremony", Responses, pp. 74-75.

²⁰Ibid., p. 74.

²¹"Symposium", The Dialogues of Plato, trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), I, 203 a-c, p. 535.

²²Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed., compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, revised by Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940; reprinted 1968), p. 695.

²³"A Speech at a Ceremony", p. 74.

²⁴Padric Colum, Orpheus: Myths of the World (New York: MacMillan Co., 1930), pp. 231-232.

²⁵The Poems of William Blake, p. 94.

²⁶"Sumptuous Destitution", Responses, p. 8.

²⁷Ibid., p. 10.

²⁸See Appendix, "A Conversation with Richard Wilbur", p. 226

²⁹The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray, ed. H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 39.

³⁰The Poetical Works of John Keats, p. 209.

³¹Holmes, p. 37.

³²See Stitt, p. 83. Wilbur said: "I called up Stanley Kunitz the day John Berryman killed himself. We consoled one another and talked about whether his act had been predictable. One thing we agreed upon was this, that whereas Stanley and I do many things apart from poetry--we both love gardening [*italics mine*], for example--John Berryman was such a very hard worker that he lived almost entirely within his profession."

³³The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 222.

³⁴Ibid., p. 222.

³⁵Cited in John Frederick Nims, ed. Poetry: A Critical Supplement (December 1948), p. 5.

³⁶Ibid., p. 6.

³⁷Ibid., p. 6.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 6-7.

³⁹See High and Ellison, p. 100.

⁴⁰The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 69.

⁴¹Richard Wilbur, Essay in "On Richard Wilbur's 'Love Calls Us to the Things of This World'", in Ostroff, p. 20.

EPILOGUE

I would have written of me on my stone:
I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

--Robert Frost, "The Lesson for Today"

What does it say over the door of Heaven
But homo fecit?

--Richard Wilbur, "For the New Railway
Station in Rome"

Despite the upheavals and trauma of this century, Richard Wilbur continues to affirm his faith in human achievements and a basically decent universe. Whether he quarrels with the world or not, he remains devoted to it. His motto is: "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World." It is for his third volume of poetry, Things of this World, that he was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Yet things must be shaped and refined by human imagination before they assume any specific meanings. Wilbur skillfully places the common objects--for example, a hole in the floor, a fire truck, potatoes, laundry, and scrubwater--in a literary or religious context, so that they become

new expressions of a cultural consciousness. For example, the "stained suds," which expresses Bruna Sandoval's faith and the holiness of her daily chores, is Wilbur's version of the rainbow, the fulfillment of God's promise to Noah.

Wilbur's relationship to the cultural past is clearly stated in his laudatory comments on A. E. Housman, who "confront[s] the present with a mind and heart that contain the past." His appraisal is also directed towards himself, and he deserves it very well. He has shown himself to be a poet-scholar, at home with the literatures of several cultures and capable of perceptive insight into other art forms, from the sculptures of Giacometti, to the paintings of Pieter de Hooch, and to the music of Beethoven. Wilbur does not slavishly repeat or record the past. He remakes it into a new poetic experience, a new artifact for his reader.

Human accomplishments are not limited to the past. The vision of heaven is reflected in man's continuous efforts to renew or recreate human artifacts which have been demolished by time. The new roof of the railway station in Rome is, for Wilbur, "defeating/that defeat" of past monuments. To this new railway station,

. . . the least shard of the world sings out
In stubborn joy,

"What city is eternal
But that which prints itself within the groping head

Out of the blue unbroken reveries
Of the building dead?

"What is our praise or pride
But to imagine excellence, and try to make it?
What does it say over the door of Heaven
But homo fecit?"

("For the New Railway Station in Rome,"
T.T.W., pp. 49-50)

It is to this-worldly existence that Wilbur dedicates his poetry. He does not try to probe into the mysteries of man's insoluble Fate, but stresses what man can do within the limitations imposed on him. Poetry writing is Wilbur's artifice and his assignment on earth. As a poet, he imagines excellence and is uncommonly successful in his attempt to "make it."

APPENDIX

A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD WILBUR

[This conversation with Richard Wilbur took place on the afternoon of the 28th of November, 1979, in his office at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. Wilbur has kindly edited the following transcription from a tape.]

Isabella Wai: What are your concepts of "love" and "faith"?

Richard Wilbur: I think I have a standard conception of what faith is. It is a crediting of things, of ideas, of conceptions about things, without any real evidence except the evidence of one's own moods. I kind of agree with Emily Dickinson's feeling that moods of happiness which seem to come from nowhere are to be considered evidence about the nature of things; and I rather trust my feeling of belonging to certain other people and to the natural world. My feeling is that there is a real connection of a kind that goes deeper than one could find in a biology book or a zoology book. It's obviously laughable to argue that one could commune with trees, or that stones can talk to you. Yet I persist in not feeling lonely in the presence of trees and stones.

Wai: Wordsworth expresses a similar attitude towards nature.

Wilbur: That's right. With me it is much less formulated than with Wordsworth, but I think there has to be an element of faith in this. You can prove, by way of Darwin, your kinship with the animals, but if you want to feel that you have a kind of communion with certain animals, that is a matter of faith. It is unprovable, and it is subject to the laughter of others.

Wai: No, I don't think so.

Wilbur: Well, it depends on how well you write it.

Wai: Very true.

Wilbur: Faith is just accepting certain attitudes and conceptions without any proof. My faith in certain ideas, or attitudes, or moods is as intermittent as everyone else's is. I'm not interested in codifying it, but I'm more willing than a lot of people are to go beyond the evidence, the hard evidence. And of course one thing that makes you go beyond the hard evidence is the other word you brought up: "love." I am always fond of Robert Frost's poem "Two look at Two." In that poem, there is a man and a woman who look at some deer across the wall somewhere on top of the mountainside; and they feel as if something were coming back to them from nature. But of course it really is the reflection of their own love for each other. Frost makes it quite plain. I think

that a lot of one's feeling of union with natural things is unilateral; and yet I persist in feeling that nothing, right down to the stone, is irrelevant to us, is not part of a family.

Wai: May I tell you my definition of your idea of faith?

Wilbur: All right.

Wai: Your faith seems to be a faith in man--man's god-like potential to impose an order on chaos and shape his own destiny. The poem "Walking to Sleep," however, seems to suggest a faith in a superhuman power, Christ, who calmed the stormy Sea of Galilee. And "On the Marginal Way" ends with a faith in a regenerative life-force which is beyond the full comprehension of man. Do you imply that after all this is a decent universe and that, in spite of all the unexplainable mysteries and hidden dangers, we are sustained by an ultimate natural order.

Wilbur: Exactly, yes. Faith and courage. The second part of the "Walking to Sleep" poem asks for courage as well; the courage simply to expose oneself to everything, and take what comes, and be sure that in some mysterious way it is good. That is a very dangerous thing to say, I think. I wouldn't want to stand in the middle of Cambodia right now and say that everything is good, but that's a position I hold to in the long run. In the short run, of course, it can sound callous.

Wai: You believe that an artist must be "fearfully free in "Objects." I think to be "fearfully free" is the attitude suggested in the second approach to sleep.

Wilbur: Yes, right. Everything you said sounds right to me.

Wai: Love still remains the sole redemptive force even in some bleak novels, for example, Pynchon's V. In what way is your idea of love similar to that expressed in Pynchon's V. and that in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"?

Wilbur: Well, I don't know Pynchon's. I started that novel and did not get very far with it. About Matthew Arnold, I'll say this. Arnold is writing about the disappearance of meanings from the world. He seems to find the sole remaining certainty in loving relationship between individual persons. I do think that's the main kind of love, the first kind of love that's important, but I don't accept, though I can understand, Arnold's vision of a completely irrelevant, humanly meaningless universe. I suppose that assumes a belief in God, and in a God who loves His Creation. Through God we participate in everything because the things are of God, because we are all connatural in the long run; but in the short run, it is ridiculous proposition, you know it. I sit here contemplating a stone and call it my brother. It looks silly, especially if I'm ineloquent about it.

Wai: Thomas Hardy's pessimism was due to the loss

of his Christian faith, for example in "The Oxen." Perhaps you have not lost yours. You tend to secularize Christianity in your poetry: you emphasize the application of Christianity to our daily life. Well, you have to avoid moral heaviness and didacticism, which are contradictory to your aesthetic principle--lightness. Are my assumptions valid?

Wilbur: All that sounds right to me. I certainly do keep secularizing, insisting on an earthbound kind of religious feeling. Do you know about my poem about the Milkweed and the Stone: "Two Voices in a Meadow"?

Wai: Yes.

Wilbur: Although I like both of them, both the Milkweed and the Stone, that poem is trying to dramatize a tension between an airy and pure and spiritual religion and another earthy and trustworthy kind as expressed by the Stone. The Stone--I didn't know what he was about when I wrote him, but I have come to understand him. He represents a spirit of total acceptance. Wherever the Stone is put, he will stay. He will feel that he is necessary to the structure of things. Aspiring wouldn't occur to him. I think that I do feel that way. I'm more interested in this world than any other; and at the same time I think that if you are going to affirm something that is out of fashion (and religion is more or less out of fashion), a good strategy maybe is to approach it in a challenging and critical way

rather than simply to recommend it. I think a lot of my poems, instead of saying "isn't this a marvellous world permeated by divinity," say instead "come on, let's not be too spiritual, let's get down to earth." That of course implies the possibility of being spiritual. That kind of attack on a too unworldly spirituality could be seen as a way of affirming the possibility of any kind of spirituality. I don't think I'm expressing myself very well, but you do understand it. I mean that spirit is not other-worldly, but world-seeing and world-transforming.

Wai: Are you a Christian?

Wilbur: Yes, yes, I think probably all Christians are intermittent Christians. Sometimes they believe it and sometimes they don't, and there are some things they believe more than others; but yes, it is necessary to me. I go to church.

Wai: Which Church do you go to?

Wilbur: The Episcopal Church.

Wai: I go to the Baptist Church.

Wilbur: As a child, I went very often to a Baptist Sunday School, so that is not strange to me.

Wai: Do you think this is a malevolent or an indifferent universe? Even Robert Frost, who believes that "Earth's the right place for love," wonders if life is governed by a malevolent force in "Design." Do you have a definite view of the universe? Or do you simply pray that

the underlying principles of the universe are regeneration and order?

Wilbur: Well, I think I know enough how it feels to be frost-bitten, you know. I know how the woods do not seem particularly attractive when you are lost in them. I don't have a suburban view of nature. I can well understand a poem like Frost's "Design," in which he entertains the idea that the world may be malevolent. It certainly does seem so at times. But my final position is that the world is beyond my power to know it; I trust that it is radically good, however it may seem at any moment.

Wai: The sea, which seems to symbolize the uncharted mysteries of the universe, appears frequently in your poetry. What is your attitude towards this source of energy and danger?

Wilbur: Which source?

Wai: The sea.

Wilbur: Ah, the sea. It is very hard or perhaps very easy to talk about the sea. I think in poetry generally it is such a supple, inclusive symbol. It does so many things in reality as one looks at it. It takes so many forms, can have so many moods that it is almost impossible for it to have one meaning. Unless one is a Puritan divine, compiling a set of images or shadows of divine things. What psychologist is it who speaks of the sense of the self as

the "oceanic sense"? I can't remember who that is, but it seems to me that the sea in poetry is likely to be all the various dimensions of the mind, and is likely to include all moods that one could possibly have, and all meanings that could possibly occur to one. If you think of the tides of the sea, they are part of the order of the world. If you want a good image of disorder, look at the sea. I think the sea is simply the place where you go to fish for every possible kind of meaning.

Wai: The relationship between imagination and reality is an important theme in your poetry. In what way does your theory differ from and coincide with Coleridge's theory of imagination?

Wilbur: I do assent to Coleridge's notion that imagination is a fusing or combinative power, and I assent to his distinction between imagination and fancy. One thing that I like in Edgar Allan Poe's criticism is his statement that we can't think of any new things; that when we create something novel in poetry, what we are doing is recombining things which were created by the Creator. The poet is not really a rival creator, I think, in the sense that he can make a new thing; but he can fuse the things that are, and combine them with thoughts and feelings, and make them stick, and thus create worlds of imagination and thought into which other people can enter. I think Coleridge simply says that imagination is the reverberation in the finite

mind of the original fiat, and reverberation is a nice word. It suggests something much diminished from the original creative power of God, much less than that.

Wai: In what way is the contemporary era an heir to the Romantic tradition? If it is an heir, in what way does it differ from its Romantic predecessors?

Wilbur: I'm not going to be very good on that. I don't have a sharp enough or simple enough conception of what Romantic poetry is. I know it consists in part of taking the world personally, and it often consists in the poet being central in his own poetry, being a kind of representative agonist. That is, I think, still going on in the poetry of the present, and some people of the Confessional School have carried it further than it has ever been carried before. I don't know. If you could specify aspects of Romanticism that interest you, maybe I could say something more about it. As I said, my conception of it is rather slippery.

Wai: Would you mind commenting on your attitude towards order?

Wilbur: I do argue that we are artificial creatures. That was what I was arguing in the title poem of my second book, Ceremony. It is natural for men to be artificial and to create order and patterns. Of course I know that some of my poems argue against the constriction of imposed patterns. A poem like "Mind," for example, is about how good it is to

be released by a happy hunch from a fixed set of ideas, so I think probably order is a concern of mine. I sometimes see from the point of view of one who feels the necessity of embracing order, of making order, and sometimes see from the point of view of one aware of the constricting possibility of order.

Wai: Some Confessional poets tend to see themselves simultaneously as victim and tormentor. You once said in an interview that you did not "know of anything which is absolutely not myself, including Adolf Hitler." Do you resemble the Confessional poets to a certain extent?

Wilbur: (laughs) I don't feel as if I were destroying the world. And actually I had a little trouble with that proposition when you stated it. I do feel that an awful lot of the Confessional poets view themselves as victims, and that it can get rather boring with the less talented; I hate the poetry of complaint. But I don't think of them often as being tormentors.

Wai: Well, John Berryman stays awake, wondering if he has murdered anyone he knows, and Sylvia Plath rises from death to eat men like ash.

Wilbur: Yes, I suppose there is some kind of violence in Sylvia Plath, not only towards herself, but also towards others. And John Berryman may have a kind of tormented feeling that he is a leper and other people might catch his disease.

Wai: Even Robert Lowell can identify with czar Lepke, Murder Incorporated.

Wilbur: Yes. At the same time I think that Lowell would have been the last person to celebrate such a person, and with Berryman, of course, there is no real desire to destroy. There is a kind of a fear that his aggressive impulses might have some real effect on the world. I think he is on the verge of that delusion Freud calls "omnipotence of thought." When you think ill of somebody and then he has an automobile accident; then you think you caused it.

Wai: What do you think of Robert Lowell in light of what I have just said?

Wilbur: In his later years he became very depressed, and did see the world as empty and dark. I was very sorry to see that happen. I was very fond of him as a man, and very fond of his early and middle poetry, in which it seems to me that there always was a positive element as well as all that trouble and all that darkness. And at the end it seems to me that his world became small and sad. To go back for a moment, when I said that about Hitler, I said it, I suppose, with a laugh, but I really meant it. I can understand almost any form of nastiness, and therefore all those things must be potentially in me; and I must not deny that, because it would make me less human, less capable of being honest in general.

Wai: Your poetry seems to be more dramatic in Walk-

ing to Sleep and The Mind-Reader. Did your interest in and translations of Molière's plays effect this change?

Wilbur: There would be part of it, certainly. When I was first writing poems, I had no connections with the theatre and also very little experience of reading my poems aloud to audiences. As I began to do more and more poetry reading, and got mixed up with the theatre, with translating Molière, with hanging around the theatre and working on Broadway shows, I got an increased sense of the audience. It is still true that when I am writing a poem, I am not thinking how it is going to sound to an audience; and I don't in fact think of it as a communication or as a performance; but inevitably my experience with the theatre and with reading poetry aloud has affected me. It affects me unconsciously, I think, for the most part.

Wai: In "Running," you seem to be nostalgic for your childhood when you played "prisoner's base," and you say, "Thinking of happiness, I think of that." What is your definition of happiness? It seems to mean full participation in life. But as a child, you were quite unaware of mortality. Somehow I don't think you share the Romantic poets' belief that a child is closer to divinity than an adult; nor do you mean happiness is unthinking physical pleasure.

Wilbur: I think you are right again. I don't idealize the child. In fact I think the child is somebody who ought to grow up, though children have marvelous qualities.

They start out, in the first place, totally selfish. They don't seem to be mighty prophets at all, although they sometimes say wonderful things, and they see things quite freshly. And I don't think of happiness purely in physical terms. No, I do think the term "happiness" is very much as you said in the earlier part of your statement--a vital, full participation in things.

Wai: You say: "Thinking of happiness, I think of that." Why?

Wilbur: You see, one thing that is going on in that poem is that I am playing a game with a lot of other people. It is not just that I have made a perfectly disciplined physical gesture, and congratulate myself on that; although that part of it is all right. I think I find no objection, really, to self-love of that kind. I remember how Gerard Manley Hopkins, at a cricket match, heard a Scotsman who was batting very well say under his breath, "Ah, sweet myself." It seems to me it is understandable and quite all right to be pleased if some discipline you've learned is working well. It is mirroring the discipline and not yourself. If you saw the same thing in somebody else, you would like it almost as well as liking it in yourself.

Wai: Would you mind defining what happiness is?

Wilbur: It is a rather huge idea. What you just said about vital participation is just about good enough. It involves a feeling of using yourself, and using yourself

well, and being responsive to as much as you possibly can. Being useful, too.

Wai: In Walking to Sleep and The Mind-Reader, you probe the Unconscious and Subconscious of the human mind. Is there a reason for this new interest? Or is it a natural development of your interest in the power of human imagination?

Wilbur: I think that I always have this kind of interest, and one bit of evidence for that would be my very early interest in Edgar Allan Poe, and in Poe's investigation of the processes of dream. And so I suppose that this interest in the irrational, and in dream processes, is simply emerging a little late in my poetry. Probably I confined it in my earliest poetry. It is more obvious in the later work. "Walking to Sleep" proceeds by a dream logic, and I think there are irrational shifts in "The Mind-Reader" of a similar kind.

Wai: You try to bring the real world and the dream world together in the second approach to sleep.

Wilbur: That's right. I'm certainly not interested in mystification. I suppose that I want to admit constantly that there is more to the world than I can understand, but at the same time not to write an obfuscating kind of poetry. Mysterious as the world may be, I don't think one conveys that in poetry by mystification. I think you just acknow-

ledge the mystery of it, acknowledge that your mind can only go so far. But even when one is proceeding by a dream logic, to a certain extent, one is also maintaining a logical thread of argument.

Wai: The passage from childhood to adulthood is one of the many themes in your poetry. Do you think that the initiation theme is a characteristic of American literature?

Wilbur: Well, there is a lot of it in American literature. Yes, I think it is a very big theme, and I suppose books are written about the matter. I think Leslie Fiedler wrote a book which has a lot to do with initiations, as in Faulkner's The Bear and so on.

Wai: And Ernest Hemingway.

Wilbur: Yes, certainly in Ernest Hemingway. I know that he wrote about initiations, or passages from one stage of life to another, quite often.

Wai: How would you distinguish modern/contemporary American poetry from modern/contemporary British poetry? (Richard Ellmann does not think they are distinguishable, but G.S. Fraser does, and he selects you specially for illustration.)

Wilbur: Fraser feels I'm more American than English. Well, I find that hard to handle. One reason I do is because I have been to England. I have friends among the English poets. I really haven't tried to make a survey of the present scene in England, and there are important people in

England about whom I'm not as well informed as I would like to be. For example, though I admire Ted Hughes' poetry a great deal, I don't know it very well. I haven't read a great deal of it. It seems to me that someone like Philip Larkin, for example, if he is an English poet and if he represents pretty much the best they have got, is not strange to us. I can think of poets like Howard Nemerov, who are not at all remote in their kind of technical ability, in their tonalities, and in their intelligence, from the poetry of Larkin.

Wai: G.S. Fraser selects "Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning" to show that there is only a Wilbur manner but not a Wilbur world. It is beautiful poetry, but he wonders what the substance is.

Wilbur: I think it has a substance to it. I know that I'm writing about the way an environment can require a certain kind of behavior of you. When you walk into a Cathedral, whether you believe in it or not, you behave in a certain way. When you are out in the middle of the desert, you behave in another way. And if you are on those marvelous marble steps in Piazza di Spagna, you might behave in such a manner as I've described. They might seem to ask for such behavior. That's really all I'm talking about, I think, although you must remember that the poem was written over twenty years ago.

Wai: Some critics accuse you of being anachronistic.

What is your reaction to this accusation?

Wilbur: I'm aware that there are just a few people who have held onto meter and rhyme to the extent that I have, and perhaps that's what people are thinking of chiefly when they see me as anachronistic. Of course there are some awfully good poets who have continued to use meters and rhymes. Elizabeth Bishop and Anthony Hecht, James Merrill, John Hollander, and William Meredith, and Howard Nemerov. There are lots of people among the ones I like best who continue to use traditional means in a fresh way. If they weren't used in a fresh way, they wouldn't be good. I have a feeling that Galway Kinnell, whom I like very much and whose work (especially the early work) I like, is very foolish when he says that we have put meter behind us and are not going to rhyme any more. It seems to me that anything which has ever worked in art is likely to work again. I think Yeats is right that in the world of culture, as in the world of the individual, there simply come moments when you are fed up with doing this and so you'd like to do its opposite for a while. And then in time you swing back again.

Wai: But in a new approach.

Wilbur: Yes, it may mean nothing more than that. There has been a wave of free verse and then a number of people, like Mark Strand, for example, are once again working with rhyme and meter somewhat. It may mean no more than that, but of course a lot of people will continue to write

in free verse, as I continue to write in meters during a period of free verse. I suppose that's what they meant by anachronism, the formal aspect of it. I don't see how, in respect of content, I'm much more old-fashioned than anybody else.

Wai: You are too "happy," according to these critics.

Wilbur: Maybe too happy. Maybe too happy. Well . . .
(laughs)

Wai: Military imagery appears frequently in your poetry, for example, "The Lilacs" and "Sunlight Is Imagination." Is this tendency a direct result from your experiences in World War II?

Wilbur: Probably so, yes. Though I'm convinced that we must never have a big war again--I'm horrified at the thought because I went to World War II, which felt like a just war--I still feel there are certain admirable qualities in the soldier. I take an old-fashioned view of the soldier, I suppose. Yeats used to say there are three kinds of people that matter--the poet or rather the artist, the saint, and the soldier--and I suppose he is talking about different kinds of discipline and ways of transcending the self. The soldier at his best does represent an admirable sort of discipline, of escape from the self, and a developed competence, so that my references to soldiers or my use of military terms are often positive. Of course

when I talk about "walking wounded" as in the poem "The Lilacs," that's not positive.

Wai: Is it altogether negative?

Wilbur: No, but it is a sorry thing to have been wounded. No, it isn't altogether that negative and, as a matter of fact, one can see that a little later in the poem the buds of the lilacs are like bullets.

Wai: You had first-hand experience in the Second World War, but you remain so positive about the world; that is remarkable.

Wilbur: I don't know. I hope I'm not an avoider of my own fears and feelings.

Wai: The war poems in The Beautiful Changes were written right after the war.

Wilbur: Or during it.

Wai: You still had something positive to say in those poems.

Wilbur: Generally yes.

Wai: It is admirable in a way. I think so. You remain "happy" in spite of that kind of experience.

Wilbur: Yes, to a certain extent, I suppose. Those poems have their dark side too. But I trust more the positive than the negative.

Wai: Carl Adkins, with reference to Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, labels your poetry as "comic" and "integrative." This particular characteristic, according to

Adkins, distinguishes you from your contemporaries.

Wilbur: I'm very fond of comedy, and I think it is as deep as tragedy. If by "comic," people mean "light," then I'd be sorry to be thought merely "light." But the comedy of Molière in The Misanthrope, the comedy of Dante: Commedia to Dante is majestic idea. The idea, I suppose, reflects an ultimate belief in balance and order and the final happiness of things. Molière always believes that evil goes against nature, and that nature will win out in the end, whatever damage is done in the meanwhile. That is the comic vision, I think, and so Paradise Lost is fundamentally a comic poem. Christianity is fundamentally a comic religion, in the sense of affirming final order, the irresistible nature of goodness. I don't think I'm alone in feeling as I feel.

Wai: Do you agree that American poets tend to write long poems--Whitman's Song of Myself, T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, Hart Crane's The Bridge, William Carlos Williams' Paterson, and Robert Lowell's Life Studies?

Wilbur: I think most people feel a challenge to write a long poem or so, and of course for me "Walking to Sleep" is a long poem, a poem that took a long time to write. To build a big systematic structure is not an idea that attracts me. I think American poetry has suffered from the desire to create a "system"; that is to say, parts of Hart Crane's The Bridge are wonderful, but the whole thing,

taken as an argument, is malarkey. And James Merrill has just finished a sustained poem. I don't know how I am going to feel about it in ten years: whether I'm going to feel that what I like about it is the particular lyrics that I can pick out of it, or the whole structure. I think probably it will be the particular lyrics rather than the whole structure. Just as in Pound's Cantos, there are great moments that I like. It seems to me the Cantos taken as a whole are a mess. There have been so many catastrophic long poems written that I do not feel tempted to take my slow hand and push it through a long, long poem. "Walking to Sleep" is probably as ambitious in terms of length as I want to be.

Wai: What do you mean by the title "Sunlight Is Imagination"?

Wilbur: That's so old a poem, written in the 40's that I'm not sure I can speak convincingly about it. I expect that much of the poem's point lies in "lively wasting": I seem always to have relished Shakespeare's line, "Consumed with that which it was nourished by."

Wai: Is your view of tradition in "Looking Into History" similar to that of T.S. Eliot's in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"?

Wilbur: I think so, because Eliot talks of "the present state of the past," doesn't he? It seems to me that is what that poem is talking about, the organization of the

past into a vital present. It is hard at this distance from the poem to expound it. But I do think there is an affinity there. And I'm sure that, as for everybody who went to college when I did, and read Mr. Eliot, and lived during the period of his dominance, a lot of his ideas have become second nature for me.

Wai: Thank you very much.

Wilbur: Well, it has been a pleasure.

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