

Excellence Achieved: The Poetry of Richard Wilbur

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Richard Wilbur's translation of a poem by Baudelaire contains the recurring lines: "There, there is nothing else but grace and measure,/ Richness, quietness, and pleasure" (Things of This World, New York, 1956, p. 26). Though the lines describe an imagined world where Baudelaire's persona would enter his love, they well describe Wilbur's own poetry. He is the man John Ciardi has called "our most melodic poet" (cf. Saturday Review, August 18, 1956, p. 18). Combining the confines of rhyme and traditional form with intelligence, imagination and a natural ear for sound, Richard Wilbur creates poems strikingly elegant and self-contained, infused with grace and measure, richness, quietness and pleasure.

Wilbur differs from the majority of post-World II poets in that he consistently remains within what Donald Hall terms "the orthodoxy" of modern poetry derived from T.S. Eliot and the new critics and which was dominant until about 1955. Characteristic of this orthodoxy was a poetry of "symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit" similar in form to that of the 16th and 17th centuries (Hall, Contemporary American Poetry, Maryland, 1962, p. 17). Within this orthodoxy, Hall classes Wilbur in the delicate and witty tradition of Marvell and Herrick. Like Herrick, Richard Wilbur is concerned with craftsmanship, the art and discipline of poetry. While other modern poets have ventured in new directions -- to capture colloquial speech; to create a subjective, highly personal poetry; to expose the poet himself by direct statement -- Wilbur has adhered to and achieved excellence within the dictates of tradition.

The principles of technique he outlines in the essay "Genie in a Bottle" (Ciardi, Mid-Century American Poets, New York, 1950, pp. 1-17) are those principles followed in his poetry and his own statements serve as the best introduction to the technical aspects of his art. On rhyme he states: "Aside from its obvious value in the finished poem as a part of poetic form and a heightener of language, rhyme seems to me an invaluable aid in composition. It creates difficulties which the utterance must surmount by increased resourcefulness" (p. 6). Concerning the structure of the total poem, he believes art to be a window, an intermediate link between the eye and the world: "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'" (p. 7). Form then, like rhyme, disciplines the poet and demands great care in the use of words. As will be evident in later examples, Wilbur incorporates these beliefs in his work.

Almost without exception his poems have a definite rhyme scheme and stanza form. From his first volume published in 1947 to his latest in 1961, the style is consistent. The discipline imposed by this style has resulted in an increasing mastery of technique.

A sense of achieved excellence surrounds Richard Wilbur's poetry. The perfect meshing of all parts results from both his care as a craftsman and a natural feeling for language. The words he chooses are the right words and that they contribute uniquely to the total effect, both sound and meaning, is not accidental. The first stanza of "Cigales" illustrates the support language gives to meaning:

You know those windless summer evenings, swollen to stasis by too-substantial melodies, rich as a running-down record, ground round to full quiet.

Completely sensitive to meaning, the sound of this passage begins lightly but becomes weighted and slowed by the long vowel sounds, the alliteration of s, the repetition in "ground round" until finally it slows to a stop. In the opening lines of "Castles and Distances" the sound and meaning are inseparable in the words chosen to create the cold water from which the walrus rises:

From blackhearted water colder
Than Cain's blood, and aching with ice, from a gunmetal bay
No one would dream of drowning in, rises
The walrus

This meshing of sound to sense with the use of assonance and alliteration is consistent to the point of being characteristic of Wilbur's work. Consider the inner rhyme and harmony of the following lines from "Bell Speech":

Great Paul, great pail of sound, still dip and draw
Dark speech from the deep and quiet steeple well,
Bring dark for doctrine, do but dim and quell
All voice in yours, while earth will give you breath.

The excellence of these passages is not accidental; Richard Wilbur is concerned with care and clearness in the choice of words. His poetic intelligence is evidenced in his knowledge of language and his ability to make full use of the connotations and derivations of words. John Ciardi cites ("Our Most Melodic Poet," S R, August 18, 1956, p. 18) the use of the word "settlement" in the following lines from "Year's End":

Now winter downs the dying of the year,
And night is all a settlement of snow.

The word may mean either 'the act of settling' or 'a small village' and here the combination of both meanings extends the image.

The title of Frederick E. Faderty's essay on Richard Wilbur, "Well-Open Eyes" (Edward Hungerford, Poets in Progress, Northwestern University Press, 1967, pp. 59-72), names the quality which makes Wilbur a poet unique beyond his mastery of style: he has a way of seeing what is really present in the world. As an acute observer of the natural world he sees deeply into objects and experiences. No subject is too insignificant; Wilbur discovers poetry in the ordinary potato, a hole in the floor, the toad. The commonplace objects that we bypass daily are the starting points for his reflections on the larger issues of death, eternity, freedom. In the seemingly insignificant he perceives life and basic deep connection between all things. In "Driftwood" the warped relics are traced from their beginnings in greenwoods, through service in wars as masts or oars on ships, through shipwrecks and long sailing on the water to their final destiny of the beach, battered and flung by waves, but saving "in spite of it all their dense/ Ingenuine grain." "The Death of a Toad" is a reflection of the small animal who, having his leg clipped off by the lawnmower, does not simply die but hops to the shade where he dies "toward some deep monotone", returning to the place of his genesis, the "seas and cooling shores" of "lost Amphibia's emperies." Similarly, the potato, when cut open, reveals "the taste of first stones, the hands of dead slaves, / Waters men drank in the earliest frightful woods, / Flint chips and peat, and the cinders of buried camps" ("The Potato"). It is the things of the natural world that speak to this poet, lead him to journey back to beginnings, to discover relationships and ultimately to perceive a basic order in the universe. There is a harmony in the world that unites the essence of driftwood, the toad, the potato, a natural interplay evident by the minute world present in his poem "A Grasshopper":

But for a brief
Moment, a poised minute,
He paused on the chicory-leaf,
Yet within it

The sprung perch
Had time to absorb the shock,
Narrow its pitch and lurch,
Cease to rock.

A quiet spread
Over the neighbor ground;
No flower swayed its head
For yards around;

The wind shrank
Away with a swallowed hiss;
Caught in a widening, blank
Parenthesis,

Cry upon cry
Faltered and faded out;
Everything seemed to die.
Oh, without doubt

Peace like a plague
Had gone to the world's verge,
But that an aimless, vague
Grasshopper-urge

Leapt him aloft,
Giving the leaf a kick,
Starting the grasses' soft
Chafe and tick,

So that the sleeping
Crickets resumed their chimes,
And all things wakened, keeping
Their several times.

In gay release
The whole field did what it did,
Peaceful now that its peace
Lay busily hid.

This sense of order underlies most of Wilbur's poems giving them a peacefulness and tone of acceptance of what is in the world. He is an affirmative poet, hopeful and positive, extolling what he finds good. There is joy in his poetry, but quiet not exuberant joy, and a calm celebration of life. In "A Voice Under the Table" he says "I take this world for better or for worse."

To avoid the impression that Richard Wilbur's poetry is too sweetly cheerful and optimistic, the opposite side to his art should be mentioned. The Beautiful Changes, his first volume published in 1947, contains a series of war poems both sad and bitter. "Mined Country" and "First Snow in Alsace" both depict the destruction brought by war. In "Country" because of land mines "Danger is sunk in the pastures, the woods are sly, / Ingenuity's covered with flowers." In "Alsace" the snow falls on:

What shellbursts scattered and deranged
Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.

"To an American Poet Just Dead" quietly criticizes the apathy of suburban life. Indifferent to the fact that the poet's voice is stilled, that he has "gone from this rotten/ Taxable world to a higher standard of living," life in the suburbs with its lawn sprinklers and Sunday fathers" continues unconcernedly. Wilbur asks:

Will the sprays weep wide for you their chaplet tears?
For you will the deep-freeze units melt and mourn?
For you will Studebakers shred their gears
And sound from each garage a muted horn?

They won't. In summer sunk and stupefied
The suburbs deepen in their sleep of death.
And though they sleep the sounder since you died
Its just as well that now you save your breath.

Criticism of the faults of Wilbur's poetry is fairly consistent. He is accused of too much intellectualizing, of an over-concern with style and sound, of attempting to capture a moment without a deep self-involvement in the poem. He produces lovely, melodic poetry, excellent for its detailed description and sudden insight, but calling for little deep response from the reader. Horace Gregory, writing in Saturday Review ("Portrait," S R, March 14, 1953, p. 13) cites as the danger of Wilbur's poetry that too many poems are afflicted by what Pound calls "the magazine touch." Theodore Holmes' criticism in Poetry states: "If Mr. Wilbur would fashion his poems from such stuff of the heart as a lived-in experience, and not simply the virtuosity of and intellectual mastery attained over it, then they would afford the reader a basis for giving a permanent meaning" ("Wilbur's New Book: Two Views," Poetry, April, 1962 p. 38).

This lack of what Holmes terms a "lived-in experience" is especially evident in comparing Wilbur with his contemporary poets who have departed from Donald Hall's orthodoxy, poets such as Lowell, Ginsburg, Roethke, Brother Antoninus, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, whose work contains the intense personal experiences from which it springs. Modern poetry in general is subjective. It is more concerned with re-creating experience than it is with ideas. The poems of Brother Antoninus are not about his "Dark Night of the Soul" (The Hazards of Holiness, New York, 1962, p.6); they are part of it. Roethke's poems do not merely describe a journey in search of self; they are part of that journey. The struggles and quests of modern poets take place within their poems. Here the poet is at the heart of the

poem, inseparable from it, trying as M.L. Rosenthal says of Robert Lowell "to catch himself in the process of becoming himself" (The New Poets, New York, 1967, p. 28). However many times this type of poem is read, the central experience that prompted the poet's creation is alive; the poet as well as the poem is in contact with the reader. This allows two possible responses by the reader. He may either witness what happens within the poem (what happens as separate from the working together of all parts of the poem) or by affirmation of the central experience he may participate. If his own experience allows the recognition that there may exist a 'dark night of the soul' like Brother Antoninus', that there may be an intense longing for self-knowledge like Roethke's, then the reader can share what happens at the heart of the poem.

The absence of this possibility for participation distinguishes Wilbur from his contemporaries. What exists in Wilbur's work is not the experience that prompted the poem but Wilbur's intellectualization of it. He explains and describes what he has seen or known in the role of an interpreter between his own experience of the world and the reader. By his own statement: "One does not use poetry for its major purposes, as a means of organizing oneself and the world, until one's world somehow gets out of hand. A general cataclysm is not required; the disorder must be personal and may be wholly so, but poetry, to be vital, does seem to need a periodic acquaintance with the threat of Chaos" (quoted directly from Wilbur by Stanley Kunitz, ed., Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement, p. 1080). This actual acquaintance with Chaos is not a part of Richard Wilbur's poetry. What is found, assuming that the acquaintance has occurred, is the aftermath -- the organizing and ordering of the world which follows the turmoil. The personal disorder remains personal and the reader shares only its result. This approach to poetry is in keeping with Wilbur's philosophy of art. To return to his belief mentioned earlier that art is a window rather than a door, he states: "If art is a window, than the poem is something intermediate in character, limited, synecdochic, 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. If art is conceived to be a door, then that dynamic relation is destroyed. The artist no longer perceives a wall between him and the world; the world becomes an extension of himself, and is deprived of its reality" (Ciardi, Mid-Century American Poets, p. 7). This statement must be considered when judging Wilbur's work. He has not followed the route of other modern poets and to the reader who views art as a door rather than a window, his poetry may seem restricted and detached. But within the limits created by his philosophy of art, the style he has chosen and the tradition in which he writes, Richard Wilbur has achieved an excellence.