David Haven Blake

Richard Wilbur's World War II Poetry

It is with great pleasure that *WLA* publishes this feature on the World War II poetry of Richard Wilbur. Although he remains one of America's most respected and honored poets, Wilbur has rarely been read as a poet of war, and certainly it is a testament to his long and distinguished career that readers tend to associate him with Italian fountains and angelic linen, or with French drama and wooded landscapes, rather than the foxholes of World War II. As James Longenbach has recently argued, however, Wilbur may well be "that rare thing: a seriously misunderstood poet," for his sense of grace and craftsmanship have frequently led critics to underestimate his engagement with the public world (138). "In Wilbur's poetry," Longenbach writes, "material that lies below the surface of the poem, giving it power, tends to be public and historical, rather than private and personal" (139-140). This issue of *WLA* makes that point abundantly clear in focusing on Wilbur's emergence as a poet while he was serving as an Army cryptographer in the European theater.

Wilbur has, on several occasions, tied his interest in poetry to his experiences during the war, but his interview with Joseph Cox offers a particularly detailed portrait of the young soldier learning to "master" his environment through verse. Whether writing poems in foxholes or borrowing an Army code machine to type out finished works, Wilbur seems intent on transforming the

violence around him into meditation and art. "The war challenged me to organize a disordered sense of things," he comments, "and so prepared me to write a poetry of maximum awareness and acknowledgement." In his accompanying essay, Cox examines this relationship in greater depth, using the history of Wilbur's company to gain a more precise understanding of the refined complexity of his verse. As Cox's discussion reminds us, the notion that combat might result in a poetry acknowledging a natural order in the world sets Wilbur apart from a vast array of author-soldiers from Gettysburg to Da Nang.

When we speak of Richard Wilbur and his writings about World War II, we generally think of the poems which he wrote in Europe that were later included in his first book, *The Beautiful Changes* (1947). John Lancaster and Jack Hagstrom fruitfully complicate this assumption in their bibliographic description of Wilbur's war-related writings for various college and military publications. Wilbur's editorials for the *Amherst Student* are of particular interest, for they demonstrate that his rhetorical engagement with the war had begun long before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. As we read descriptions of this young student's opinions about the impending conflict, we are reminded how war can invade the consciousness of soldiers and civilians alike and how far-away battles can become the psychic burden of virtually anyone who reads the newspapers with sympathy and imagination.

The continuum between the martial and domestic worlds is poignantly expressed in Wilbur's early poem "Italy: Maine" in which a soldier reflects on the Maine coast he and his wife have grown to love. Although the poet re-creates this American scene with both affection and precision, his comparison of these distant worlds turns on the central irony that in the poet's imagination

they had already begun to merge. While war-torn Italy becomes a site of unbridled life, of sun-stunned landscapes and "thick pasture grass," the Maine coast resembles a battlefield in which "apple and larch / Make their stand among stones" and would "rather be beaten than bend." The publication of "Italy: Maine" in *WLA* marks the first time the poem has been in print since its initial appearance in the 23 September 1944 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

While Lancaster and Hagstrom detail the roots of Wilbur's aesthetic response to the war, Jewel Spears Brooker looks forward to the 1950s and 1960s, examining the war poems for what they reveal about the poet's abiding themes and concerns. Brooker focuses on the relations between individual perception and the stubborn (and oftentimes beautiful) *things* of the world in offering an extended reading of both "Mined Country" and "First Snow in Alsace." Each poem pits an individual literary imagination against the stronger, collective, and material imaginations of the soldiers transforming the European countryside into a wildly destructive warzone. In "Mined Country," for example, two minds battle for possession of the landscape, one which would endow the earth with hidden explosives and the other which would fill it instead with learning, trust, and love. Wilbur, as Brooker shrewdly points out, is too realistic to suggest that the poem might restore the world to itself; his imagination does not deny the existence of such mines but functions instead as a counterpoint to their elaborate deceptions. In its ironic attribution of deceit and intent to the woods, the pastures, and the flowers, "Mined Country" implicitly underscores Kenneth Burke's comment that war is the culmination of "millions of cooperative acts" and that we must ultimately consider it to be "a disease, or perversion of communion" (22).

The papers in this feature come from a panel on Richard Wilbur and the Poetry of World War II that I organized for the May 1997 meeting of the American Literature Association in Baltimore, Maryland. The response to the panel was overwhelmingly positive, and many in the audience encouraged us to go forward with this volume. *WLA* is happy to be making this contribution to Wilbur studies, and we are grateful to Mr. Wilbur for his gracious cooperation with our contributors' requests. As many critics have noted, Wilbur has an original voice in the history of 20th-century poetry, and his allusions to Spenser, Milton, and Racine may seem even more unique in a journal dedicated to understanding different cultural responses to armed conflict. In his celebrating the "things of this world," however, Wilbur has always emphasized the dignity of individual rather than collective perceptions. He made this point directly in "On Freedom's Ground," a cantata he wrote with the composer William Schuman for the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. In section III Wilbur returns to the subject of war, asking Americans to reflect on the many who died before them:

> Mourn for the dead who died for this country.
> Whose minds went dark at the edge of a field,
> In the muck of a trench, on the beachhead sand,
> In a blast amidships, a burst in the air. (*NCP* 45)

"What did they think of before they forgot us?" he asks, but at this almost extravagantly patriotic moment, the poet cautions us against turning the dead into a single, collective voice. "Let us not force them to speak in chorus," he writes, "These men diverse in their names and faces / Who lived in a land where freedom could be chosen." The same might be said of war's survivors, that we must preserve the singularity of their voices and resist

the many cultural forces that would turn them into a uniform patriotic song. It is in the spirit of Wilbur's highly individual accomplishments that we offer this feature on his work. ❑

Works Cited

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