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Mind and World in Richard Wilbur's War Poetry

From 1942 to 1945, Richard Wilbur served with the United States Army in Africa, Italy (Cassino and Anzio), and southern France. On a number of occasions, he has said that this war experience was formative in his work as a poet. He began writing poetry in foxholes for "earnest therapeutic reasons"—to relieve boredom, to cope with anxiety, to "forget how frightened and disoriented" he was (*Conversations* 37, 196). "My first poems were written in answer to the inner and outer disorders of the Second World War and they helped me, as poems should, to take ahold of raw events and convert them, provisionally, into experience" (*Responses* 118). Two years after his return from duty, he published *The Beautiful Changes* (1947), his first volume of verse, and not surprisingly, it includes a few poems written in Europe during the war and sent home to his wife. Because the poet himself has indicated that these poems are in some ways the fountainhead of his work, it is useful to examine them for continuing concerns, for themes that were to occupy him in one form or another throughout a long career. Of these concerns, none is more important than the tension between "inner and outer," between mind and world.

The careful balance between mind and world that characterizes Wilbur's war poetry is also at the heart of such famous poems as "Love Call Us to the Things of

This World," "A World Without Objects is a Sensible Emptiness," "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra," and "The Eye." It is central in his many poems about painting, his many poems about objects, his poems about nature, his poems about epistemology and the imagination. Many post-Romantic poets—Wallace Stevens, for example—have allowed the imagination to swallow up the universe. But not Wilbur. He has always given the world its due. The function of the poet, his persona claims in "Lying," is not making something out of nothing, but bearing witness to what has already been made.

> . . . In the strict sense, of course,
> We invent nothing, merely bearing witness
> To what each morning brings again to light.
> (*NCP* 9)

Objects such as stones and gold crosses do not depend on the mind for their existence. "All these things / Are there before us; there before we look / Or fail to look" (*NCP* 9). A poet is prone, Wilbur has remarked, "to the illusion that he can make or unmake the world, or create an alternative reality. This he cannot do . . . what he can do [is to] interact with the given world, see and feel and order it newly" through the power of his imagination (*Catbird's* 139).

The belief that a poet cannot make the world does not mean, of course, that he does not shape his own experience into something rich and strange. In an interview in the *Paris Review*, Wilbur described the imagination as the faculty that fuses the ideal and the physical world into one (*Conversations* 185). In using imagination, then, he gives experience a new shape, a new being within being. The poetic imagination works, in his view,

by finding resemblances, by creating similes and metaphors by which individuality is enhanced.

> Odd that a thing is most itself when likened:
> The eye mists over, basil hints of clove . . .
> (*NCP* 10)

It is hardly surprising that a dual insistence on the otherness of the world and the power of the imagination is evident in the poems Wilbur wrote from the battlefield. After all, to survive and keep his sanity, a soldier must at once acknowledge and distance himself from the realities of battleground experience.

The war poems are additionally valuable in that they demonstrate that Wilbur was from the beginning of his career fully aware not only of the power and beauty of the natural world, but also and simultaneously of its ambiguity and the presence of evil. Wilbur's reputation has suffered from the critical itch to categorize him as the poet of happiness, a compliment that is usually accompanied by praise of his craftsmanship. Many critics who celebrate him as the poet of joy ignore or pay inadequate attention to the complexity of his forms and themes. Other critics, conceding his brilliant craftsmanship, dismiss him as having failed the *angst* test (Bogan, Jarrell). Wilbur's best and fairest critics, of course, admit his complexity. Ejner Jensen, for example, has pointed out that Wilbur is far more complex than many of his critics give him credit for being (Jensen 244-45). Clara Claiborne Park emphasizes Wilbur's inclination to praise, but does not deny that in some poems he projects an uneasiness that is difficult to categorize (Park 565). And in *Music in a Scattering Time*, Bruce Michelson has written persuasively of the dark side of Wilbur's vision, of the sheer toughness of his mind.

The evidence of the war poems is that Wilbur is positive and negative at once and that his strength comes not from easy affirmation but from the tension he maintains between affirmation and negation. The two poems analyzed for this paper—"First Snow in Alsace" and "Mined Country"—are particularly interesting in this regard. In the first, he introduces a powerful symbol of beauty and unity, snow, only to undercut it with associations of disintegration and death. In the second, he focuses on an image of random destruction, a land mine, and complicates it with hints of transcendence. In neither poem does he permit these contraries to cancel each other; in both, he presents them as reciprocally defining, reciprocally sustaining.

The relationship between a mind conscious of itself, of evil, and of a world "not vague, not lonely, / Not governed by me only" (*NCP* 12) is poignantly caught in "First Snow in Alsace" and "Mined Country." In "First Snow in Alsace," fresh snow drapes but does not conceal destruction and recent carnage; in "Mined Country," more treacherously, a lush meadow conceals land mines left by retreating German soldiers. Composed at about the same time and out of the same experience, these poems have much in common. The genre in both is a variation on what M. H. Abrams has defined as the "greater Romantic lyric," a poem in which a description of nature is followed by a meditation using the scene as a reference point. In both of Wilbur's poems, the natural scene, which is beautiful, serves as a mask for a man-made scene or situation involving horror and moral ambiguity. The theme in both poems is the same—"First Snow" and "Mined Country" deal with a discrepancy between what is seen and what is known, between appearance and reality, between surface and depth. The point of view in both is that of a well-educated, slightly ironic soldier who is sensitive to beauty but conscious of

beauty's mysterious alliance with evil. He seems to have, as Wilbur had, and like the speaker in many World War I poems, this narrator indicates special concern for younger soldiers. Finally, the approach to language and symbol is the same. Both interweave realism and symbolism, elevating local scenes to universal significance. And in both poems, close reading tends to destabilize first impressions, at once confirming and disturbing initial implications and interpretations.

"First Snow in Alsace" (*NCP* 347) describes a pause in the war, a moment of serenity in the history of a war-torn European village. In large part because of its location in southeastern France on the German border, Alsace-Lorraine has long been a pawn in the seemingly endless *agon* between two powerful neighbors. It was ceded to Germany as part of the treaty ending the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, retroceded to France at the end of the First World War, annexed by Germany at the beginning of the Second World War, and returned to France at the end of that war in 1945. In all of these conflicts, Alsace was a spot where armies clashed and blood flowed, so much so that the very word is synonymous with a place caught in the cross hairs. Wilbur was there in the winter of 1944-1945, a Staff Sergeant and cryptographer with the US Army. In a letter to the author of this paper, he recalls that his unit landed near Fréjus in August, moved rapidly northward through Marsanne and Montelimar, liberated Luxeuil in the Haute-Saône, and on New Year's Eve took possession of a Strasbourg brewery. His memory is that "First Snow in Alsace"

> derives from experiences in December or January, when the situation had become more or less static and the Allied troops were spread out thinly facing a dug-in Siegfried Line. In those circumstances, a unit could

> have found quarters in a particular town, placed guards around it, stacked rations, and ammunition in vacant areas, and be only "a mile or two" from the fighting. In fact, we were at such close quarters with the enemy that the Division was once in danger of being surrounded, and I made ready to burn and blow up our code and cipher equipment lest it be captured. (Letter, 3 November 1997)

One can concede, as I do, that the persona of a poem is in a special sense always a fiction and yet maintain that Mr. Wilbur's memories of the situation from which the poem grew are helpful in understanding it. The details in the poem are consistent with his account of a static moment in the final battles along the Siegfried Line. Homes have been gutted, lawns crevassed, railings tangled, and soldiers lie unburied where they fell. The machinery of war—ammunition, ration stacks, guard stations—litters the landscape.

The poem itself consists of a soldier's meditation—precipitated by the first snowfall of the season, by a moment of wonder at dawn at the beginning of winter.

> The snow came down last night like moths
> Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
> Covered the town with simple cloths. (*NCP* 347)

On one level, "First Snow in Alsace" can be interpreted as an affirmation, the "snow as a benediction in the midst of violence" (Edgecombe 17). Snow, after all, is a universal symbol for magical transformation, for beauty. It covers mud with white linen; it transforms ugliness into beauty and connects fragments into unity. Snow touches both the external world and the human mind with wonder. And these effects are all quite evident in the poem.

The shattered town is blanketed in white, and newly clad weapons sparkle in the morning sun. But on another level, the affirmation, like first snow itself, is short-lived. The poem, in fact, is riddled with ambiguity, as can be seen by attending to its language, its structure, and to the observer's voice.

The affirmative associations of snow are simultaneously asserted and undercut, beginning with the title. The lovely phrase "first snow" elicits traditional associations, the adjective pointing in a subtle way to Eden. But these meanings are immediately subverted by the location of the snow, in Alsace, a post-Edenic place still beautiful but repeatedly marred by hatred and violence. Reflection further adjusts the interpretation of "first snow" by reminding the reader that snow is inconsistent with the iconography of Eden, for snow is associated not only with beauty, but also with winter and with death. The connection between beauty and death is deepened by the startling opening simile comparing the falling of snowflakes to a shower of dead moths that have incinerated themselves by flying too close to a lamp. Although burned moths are consistent with the lightness and texture of snowflakes, they are inconsistent with benediction and qualify the positive associations of the snowfall. The fluffy white blanket that covers the town is composed of multitudes of corpses, and as the poem moves forward, that simple death-woven cloth becomes a shroud for soldiers left indecently exposed where they fell. The snow becomes the white sheet shielding them from vultures and curious onlookers, but also, because it "covers the town with simple cloths," the snow, as in Joyce's "The Dead," becomes a shroud not only for the dead but for the dying.

The poem's eight tercets can be seen as two sets of four. The first set consists of what the observer sees and knows; the second of what he imagines. The first four

tercets are mildly ironic, for this narrator is fully aware of the discrepancy between appearance and reality, aware that "first snow" is an ephemeral covering of horrific scenes and that the horror will survive the snow.

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

The "hinge" between the first and second sections of the poem is the phrase "you think" at the beginning of the fifth tercet. In his mind's eye, the observer sees not the fighting, but the snow falling on the slain soldier just out of sight.

> You think: beyond the town a mile
> Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes
> Of soldiers dead a little while.

The snow that is filling the dazzled eyes of the living is in a different sense filling the eyes of the dead. This literalization of what has been a metaphor is startling. The tears of the dying soldier, frozen in death, become literal ice, covered with snow that will melt in the noonday sun. The tears of the living soldier-observer, though not yet frozen, will also congeal in death. Wilbur creates a double image here, pointing first to the snow in the eye of the fallen, and then to the snow that is general all over the Western front, indeed all over the world. Interestingly, it is not snow that fills the eyes, but "snowfall," a word that hints of man's first disobedience, of the primal rebellion at the root of all enmity. All of these glimpses of heaven and hell, Eden and Alsace, are contained in the mind's eye of the musing soldier at dawn.

The image of eyes blinded by snow, of "iced" eyes, is central in another of Wilbur's war poems, "On

the Eyes of an SS Officer" (*NCP* 348). In that poem, Wilbur contrasts the eyes of the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, who discovered the south pole, and a "Bombay saint." Amundsen is described as an "amorist of violent, virgin snows / At the cold end of the world's spit." Dazzled by her brightness, blinded by her whiteness, he pursues this violent virgin phantom to the ends of the earth, persisting in his obsession even when ice has taken his eyes. At the other extreme, "asquat in the market place," a Bombay saint—"An eclipsed mind in a blind face"—is also dazzled and blinded, not by snow, but by the sun. Both Amundsen and the saint are amorists blinded by their love. In contrast to them, the poet presents the SS officer blinded by hate.

> But this one's iced or ashen eyes devise,
> Foul purities, in flesh their wilderness . . .

For Amundsen, with his fanatical love, the wilderness exists apart from himself, and he is willing to give his life in pursuit of this virginal reality. For the SS officer, with his fanatical hate, the wilderness—his frozen heart—exists within. His iced eyes create the foul purities of blood, race, and nation. And his ashen eyes, directing the Holocaust, burn in the heart of Europe a wilderness of starkest horror. In "On the Eyes of an SS Officer," reminiscient in its central images of Frost's "Fire and Ice," snow in the eyes is associated with fanaticism, blindness, hatred, and profoundest evil. The poem on the Nazi eyes is particularly interesting when read in conjunction with "First Snow in Alsace."

To return to "First Snow in Alsace": the soldier's mind moves from his dead comrade on the outskirts of town to living persons who will discover the snow that has fallen while they slept. He imagines children waking

up to their first snow and knows that their immediate response will be one of delight.

> At children's windows, heaped, benign,
> As always, winter shines the most,
> And frost makes marvelous designs.

The image of children in the springtime of their days admiring snow through nursery windows adds another dimension to "first snow." In so doing, it enriches the juxtaposition of beauty and death, youth and age, innocence and experience, introducing the mildest irony into the depiction of their response to snow. They welcome it for its shimmering beauty and, insulated by glass and by innocence, do not feel the slightest chill. In using the word "benign" to characterize snow as experienced by children, the narrator suggests that the word would be impossible for adults, that it would falsify what he himself knows about frost and snow and indeed what he now knows about his own first snow. The image of nursery windows appears in another war poem, "Place Pigalle." In the suburbs, evening, in classical fashion, brings children to their beds and assumes its guardian position at nursery windows, while in the red light district, evening brings soldiers to their whores and "electric graces" banish the dark (*NCP* 349).

The mind of the persona in "First Snow" moves from children to a young soldier, no longer a child but transformed into one by the magic of first snow.

> The night guard coming from his post,
> Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow
> And warms him with a boyish boast:
> He was the first to see the snow.

The snow fills his eye and his imagination, transporting him "ten first-snows back" to his own childhood. For him, the snow is a benediction, for it restores his innocence. But the very adjective that suggests the guard's innocence—"boyish"—unravels the observer's, for from his more experienced point of view, the word would mean not only "innocent" but also "foolish" or "immature," revealing both his sympathy with and his distance from the guard. The night guard's response is further undercut by the reader's awareness that the snow filling his eyes with wonder is the same snow filling the eyes of his fallen brother. In imagining the children's delight and observing the guard's recovery of innocence, the observer glimpses Eden, but from the outside, from beautiful bedeviled Alsace. These glimpses, which he knows are ephemeral, are tempered by his awareness that the children are inexperienced and the night-guard is boyishly nostalgic; the soldier's hopes co-exist with his knowledge that fear has gutted homes, that betrayal has littered the region with corpses, that this beautiful snow is a shroud for all mankind.

"Mined Country" is also based on Wilbur's experience as a soldier. In a letter to the author of this paper, he explains that he was "very aware of mines" in the Italian campaign and "saw soldiers in the process of detecting and disarming them. . . . The retreating Germans moved up into mountain areas both in Italy and in France." He is unable to remember with certainty at what point in the war he wrote the poem, but he does remember the sort of experience that it describes. Thematically and technically, "Mined Country" has much in common with "First Snow in Alsace," but they are not replicas of each other. Both contrast the world as it is seen and as it is known to be, but "Mined Country" deals with an additional contrast suggested by the pun in the title. "Mined country" is also "mind country," an alter-

native place created by a tutored imagination and brought into the text of the poem through allusions to Spenser, Milton, the Bible, and the pastoral tradition. The classical references deepen the meditation by bringing into play the world of myth, on the one hand, and that of desire, on the other. In that these allusions point to a lost world, they tend to temporalize the landscape, reminding the soldier of what has been and by implication suggesting its possible recovery.

The title of "Mined Country" (*NCP* 343) refers primarily to a mine field left by retreating German soldiers. The observing soldier / persona is fully aware of the deadly discrepancy between surface innocence and hidden evil in this scene.

> They have gone into the gray hills quilled with
> birches,
> Drag now their cannon up the chill mountains,
> But it's going to be long before
> Their war's gone for good.

War has scorched the region, bringing an unnatural winter to the mountains which even in summer are cold and gray. The image comparing leafless summer birches to porcupine quills will seem vividly mimetic to anyone who has seen black and white war photographs of bombed European hillsides. The war that has disrupted the literal seasons has also disturbed the seasons of life, with the old remaining alive at home and the young dying on the battlefield. The Germans have gone, but not "gone for good"; they will be back, and even while they are away, the mines will serve as their surrogates.

The scene, ironically, is pastoral.

> Danger is sunk in the pastures, the woods are sly,
> Ingenuity's covered with flowers!

We thought woods were wise but never
Implicated, never involved.

That the mines have been planted in green pastures underscores the monstrous nature of this war. Instead of planting seeds to insure new life, soldiers have planted explosives to destroy life. In ancient agricultural ceremonies, objects were buried to simulate sexual intercourse with mother earth and thus by imitative magic to secure fruitfulness; in this modern perversion, objects are buried to guarantee a different harvest. This situation has divided nature against herself, for woods provide cover for the agents of destruction and flowers bedeck the carpet of deception that will entice the unwitting victims. Even roses, the most beautiful of flowers, have been engaged as whores to seduce the innocent into this dangerous bower.

As in "First Snow," Wilbur's meditation on the mind's engagement with the natural world is at once enriched and complicated by introducing references to childhood into the poem. The persona remembers his immediate and unsuspicious relation to the world as a child and reflects that childhood has taken a direct hit in this war. The knowledge that woods and roses are implicated in this game of Russian roulette "hits at childhood more than churches / Full up with sky or buried town fountains." The persona reflects that experience with land mines damages childhood more than seeing bombed churches damages it, that mines hit childhood harder than they hit anything else, that innocence is the first casualty of war. These reflections indicate that the mines have scored a direct hit on the persona's own childhood, on the child that remains within him even yet. Life itself is seen as mined country, and the mines are the evil lurking in the fields where all children play. One of the starkest indications of the devastation of innocence in

the poem is the reference to a grazing cow stepping on a land mine. The persona, whose infancy would have included "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon," sees "Cows in mid-munch go splattered over the sky." This echo of a beloved nursery rhyme, this misalignment of a pastoral subject and an apocalyptic predicate, forces an adjustment in the way one understands and deals with the world. This requires a new language.

While musing on childhood and war, the persona is watching younger soldiers clearing land mines from pastures. He sees these soldiers, in their innocence, in their youth, as little more than children themselves.

> Seeing the boys come swinging slow over the grass
> (Like playing pendulum) their silver plates,
> Stepping with care . . .

The soldiers are boys, their work is a game, and their mine detectors are toys. Without denying the images of the real world, the observer qualifies and intensifies the scene before him by superimposing an image of innocence.

The images of childhood culminate in the last two stanzas in which the persona refers to the child within the adult, the child that has inherited a situation in which beauty betrays and innocence leads to death. This child, this dumb child (speechless because an infant, but also because horror struck), needs to be disinherited. Disinheriting the dumb child suggests separating the adult persona from the part of the self inclined to trust appearances, the experienced part from the innocent part. Alternatively, in the injunction to tell this child "to trust things alike," disinheriting the child suggests taking back what we have bequeathed to him—this legacy of land mines and all they represent. Some post-structuralist

critics would argue that these positive and negative suggestions cancel each other, but in Wilbur's text, they do not. Rather, they reinforce the double play on the meaning of the "whole world's wild," suggesting that the wildness of random violence can be attenuated, but not removed, and the wildness of nature can be enhanced, though not restored.

The preoccupation with childhood in Wilbur's war poems is essentially a preoccupation with loss, with lost innocence, lost immediacy. Such a preoccupation seems realistic in context, for soldiers displaced from civilization to the barbarism of the front line would predictably be disturbed by the violent disruption of natural and temporal cycles. The passing of childhood, the initiation into adulthood, the knowledge of evil, and the awareness of death are painfully foregrounded in scenes such as those presented in "First Snow in Alsace" and "Mined Country." Reflections on lost innocence and the passing of youth, however, are essentially nostalgic; they are not necessarily redemptive. What would be redemptive in such a situation is a suggestion of transcendence, of getting beyond the present horror and moving forward (or returning) to simplicity and unity. And "Mined Country," far more than "First Snow," contains the redemptive hints, the whisper that it might be possible to "pick back / Far past all you have learned" and recover at least in the imagination one's "earliest trusts." Just as in "First Snow" the initial impression of dazzling beauty is brought into tension with blinding hatred and death, so in "Mined Country," the first impression of random violence is brought into tension with hints of transcendence. These hints point to the redemption of the individual soldier and the renewal of civilization, not as a certainty in either case, but as a possibility.

Both "First Snow in Alsace" and "Mined Country" present a soldier musing on a shattered world and thus

deal quite naturally with the intersection of mind and world. In the latter, however, there is a further intersection—that between the persona's imagination and the external world, an intersection hinting that love might be "in some manner restored." The hints of transcendence are first suggested in the title pun, which points not just to the persona's knowledge of the scene with its concealed evil, but to his awareness of an alternative country, a country of the mind or imagination. The pun suggests a distinction between the knowing and the creative mind, between landscape and mindscape, the first associated with the world of nature and the second with the world of art, the first natural and the second artificial. Both of these countries (nature and imagination) have concealed traps. In both countries, one must know where and how to step, how to clear mines without getting hurt, how to "pick back / Far past all you have learned." Wilbur's pun complicates the structure of thought in the poem. The structure of the mined landscape is primarily spatial, having to do with juxtaposition and with surface and depth, or with the split between consciousness and the world. But the structure of the mindscape is primarily temporal, based on an interplay of memory and desire, reaching into the mythic past and into an imagined future that is partially a restoration of that past.

The tension between the world of nature and the world of the imagination is inseparable from the fact that the soldier persona brings an imagination shaped by the classical and Biblical traditions and by Spenser and Milton. Like the soldier in "First Snow" and like the poet himself, this man has a classical education. In looking over this pastoral scene, he is considering the adjustments in consciousness that must be made to accommodate the deadly modifications that have been introduced during the war. He is a man trying to learn a new lan-

guage, one that will enable him to deal simultaneously with land mines and with his earliest trusts. He is conscious not only of the scene and of the mines, but he is conscious of consciousness. That he is using the resources of a tutored imagination to understand and at least partially to salvage his earliest trusts is revealed by a cluster of allusions and echoes related to states of innocence—to childhood, to Eden, to the Biblical and classical pastoral tradition, and to literary texts related to lost psychological or theological states.

By systematically alluding to the classical and Biblical traditions, the persona extends the implications of the poem from the childhood of individuals—himself, his fellow soldiers—to the childhood of our race, the dawn of our religion, the infancy of Western civilization. The classical allusions come in principally through Spenser and Milton, both of whom synthesized classical, Christian, and national myths in their epics. The clearest literary allusion in Wilbur's poem is to the *Faerie Queene*, for Belphoebe, mentioned in Wilbur's fourth quatrain, is one of Spenser's noblest creations. Her name, Spenser explains, combines "bel" with "Phoebe," one of the ancient names of Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon, of the hunt, and of chastity. Belphoebe, in fact, is the English daughter of Diana, who adopted her and raised her in the woods. In Book III of the *Faerie Queene*, Belphoebe emerges from the woods and finds Timias, King Arthur's soldier squire, near death from combat with an evil assailant. She tends his wounds, fetches healing herbs, and nurses him back to health.

> It's rightly-called-chaste Belphoebe some would miss,
> Some calendar colts at Kentucky gates.

When placed into the mind of a persona watching boys clear land minds, this myth is powerful. The implied

conditional, signaled in part by a shift to the subjunctive mood, is probably: "If the mine explodes, wounding or killing a boy," then even if he did not know her name, he would miss Belphoebe, the woodland goddess who comes to care for soldiers hurt in the fight against evil. And especially if he is British, he would miss the peaceful pastoral world associated with her, the blessings she brings—healing, chastity, courtesy, peace. An American soldier, similarly, would miss his own more innocent world, the beautiful pastoral scenes associated with popular calendar art—scenes, for example, of Kentucky, with its bluegrass, its white gates, its sleek horses. Such allusions to innocence in the midst of horror would be in some poets an occasion for bitter irony; in Wilbur, the allusions suggest irony, but the overall effect is one of a poignant mixture of memory and desire, loss and hope.

One other allusion to the *Faerie Queene* should be noted. As the soldiers go about their dangerous work, "Roses like brush-whores smile from bowers." The simile comparing roses to whores brings to mind the most famous of all of Spenser's symbolic places, the "Bower of Bliss" (Book II). That "Bower," like Wilbur's, is associated with entrapment through pastoral beauty and promised joy. It is the home of the wily enchantress Acrasia (Intemperance) and is associated, on the one hand, with seductiveness and eroticism, and on the other, with sterility and death. Unlike the cynical soldiers in "Place Pigalle" who seek whores in full knowledge that they are whores, these boys are innocent and would embrace the brush-whores simply because they are irresistible to the senses, because they promise bliss that neither roses nor whores can give.

Wilbur's use of Spenser's epic points backward to the *Aeneid*, Virgil's poem about war and the civilized ideal. Virgil, like Spenser in the *Shepherdes Calendar*, is a master of the pastoral mode. In the *Eclogues*, he de-

scribes sheep safely grazing, the pastoral ideal that Arnold describes with such contempt in "In Harmony with Nature."[1] He also predicts the appearance of an ideal ruler, taken by the church fathers as a prophecy of Christ, and the re-establishment of a peaceable kingdom, a Golden Age without war. Virgil, then, like Spenser, is an inextricable part of the tissue of allusion to innocence, to earliest trusts, to possible peace.

The pastoral mode, crucial in the construction of "Mined Country," is even richer than the allusions to Virgil's *Eclogues*, Spenser's *Shepherdes Calendar*, and American calendar art would suggest. The most basic pastoral echoes in "Mined Country" are from the Bible. "The Lord is my shepherd / I shall not want," sings David the shepherd-king in a pastoral psalm that is central in the Jewish and Christian traditions (Psalm 23). And what Christian does not treasure the pastoral Christ, who says in John's gospel (10:14): "I am the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep." For an observer who remembers these pastoral assurances, the presence of land mines is a prickly problem. To solve it, shepherds must learn a new language. Most striking among the Biblical echoes, perhaps, are those to Eden and the Fall. Land mines provide a startling variation on the idea that one of the consequences of the Fall was the corruption of nature. In the primeval situation, the corruption of the ground involved the proliferation of weeds and thorns, but in this war, the corruption of the ground involves land mines, more treacherous by far. And in that they are concealed by the grass, they suggest that they have engaged the earth itself as their accomplice. The poem is full of reminders of post-lapsarian existence, but it also contains echoes of Eden, that prelapsarian world where our earliest trusts were born and were tied to sunshiny fields and innocent woods. The allusions to Eden

and the Fall are to some extent filtered through *Paradise Lost*, a seminal text for Wilbur (Brooker 535).

Wilbur's control of tone in these poems is interesting. In a poem about land mines, allusions to *Paradise Lost*, to Eden, and to the pastoral ideal would normally occasion bitter irony and perhaps didactic rage. Such allusions in a poem by Hardy or Housman, Sassoon or Owen would have been much, much darker. But although Wilbur's war poems are streaked with irony, the poet, or his persona, manages to remain poised on the edge of bitterness. This particular tonal effect derives in part from the tension maintained between subjective and objective aspects of experience, in part from the juxtaposition of formal verse and frightening content.

The formal perfection for which Wilbur is justly famous is evident even in these early poems. In "Mined Country," the meter is sprung rhythm, roughly 6,5,4,4 in all eight quatrains. Sprung rhythm, with its seemingly random beats, mimics land mines in its unpredictability. Sprung rhythm is strongly associated with Hopkins, another pastoral poet haunted by the loss of innocence, another haunted by hints of transcendence. Wilbur's rhymes are also uncanny in their rightness. To judge from the first stanza, the poem is to be distinguished by emphatic internal rhymes such as "long / gone" and "hills / quilled / chill", but not by end rhymes. The second stanza reveals that the rhymes were only delayed, and when they occur, they are exact and often explosive—"up / stop" and "back / lack"—, perfect to describe a mined country. In "First Snow in Alsace," Wilbur uses *terza rima*, the verse form of the *Divine Comedy*. Not only does this form constitute an allusion to Dante's hell and thus point to a major resource for understanding war and evil, but to Dante's purgatory and paradise as resources for understanding possible re-

demption. The formality of the verse form also serves to enhance the objectivity of tone.

The seven war pieces in Wilbur's first volume are among his earliest poems, in spite of which they seem mature, both in technique and in thematic complexity. They are important for an understanding of his development, bearing out Eliot's line in "East Coker"—"In my beginning is my end." For Wilbur and perhaps for all combatants, war vividly points to life's starkest, most irreconcilable contraries—innocence and experience, love and hate, good and evil, life and death, the individual and the nation. Wilbur coped with these stubborn antitheses not by blinking, not by faking, but by contextualizing them through allusions to Western literature and by finding metaphors and similes through which to shape them without violating their being, their inscape, as Hopkins would say. He consistently assumes that "the essential poetic act is the discovery of resemblance, the making of metaphor, and that, the world being one thing, all metaphor tends toward the truth" (*Catbird's* 140). His achievement in these and subsequent poems is inseparable from his integrity and his simultaneous fidelity to himself and to the external world around him.[2] ❑

Notes

1. Matthew Arnold is reacting against an easy Romanticism by asserting the superiority of mind over nature. See "In Harmony with Nature" in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. W.E. Houghton and G.R. Stange (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968) 410.

2. I would like to express my gratitude to Clayton E. Lewis of the National Endowment for the Humanities for the insights I gained during conversations with him regarding Wilbur's war poems.

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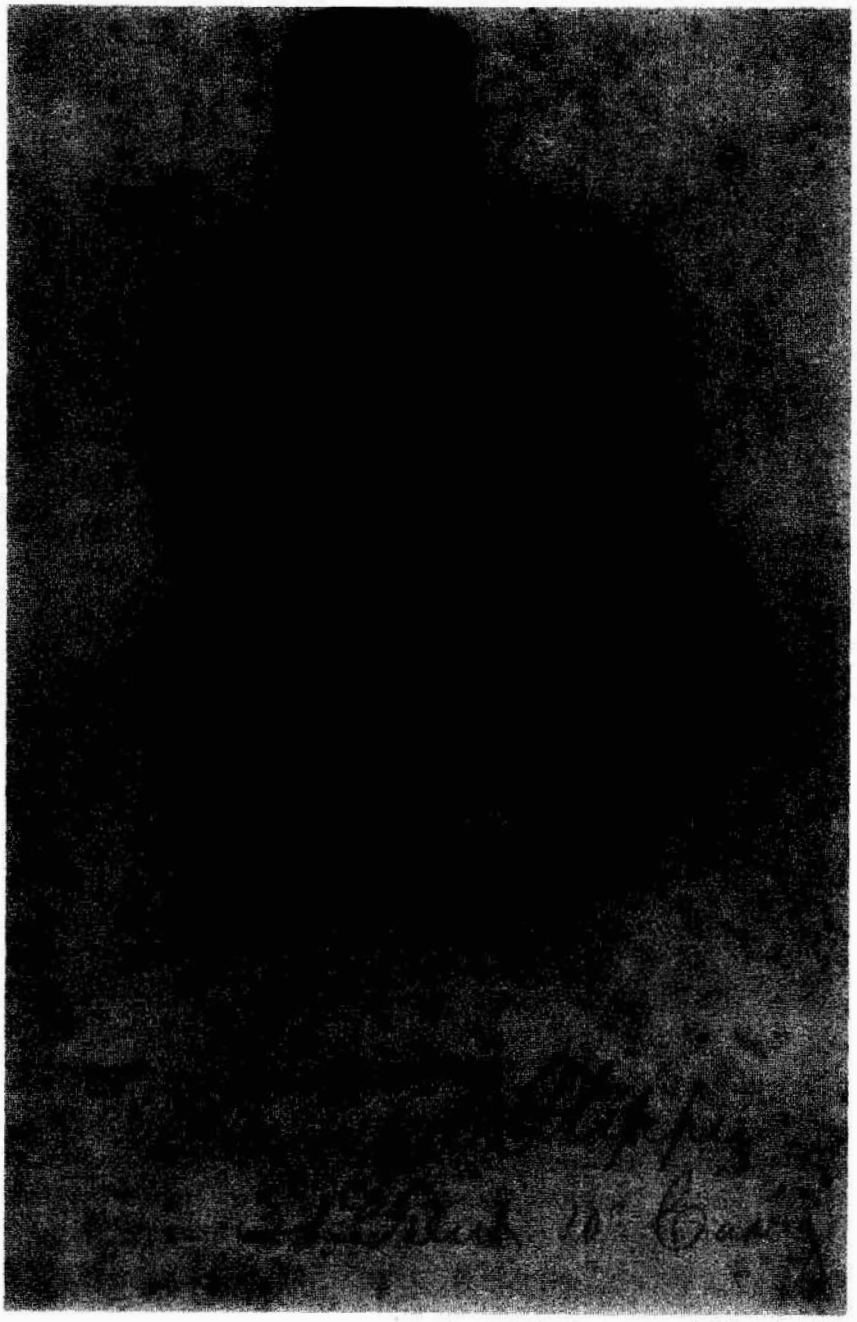
***Editor's Note**: This drawing of Richard Wilbur is by Marty Weinstein. Says Wilbur, the drawing "rather idealizes me because Marty, in civilian life, had been used to drawing Hollywood stars for the entertainment section of the Sunday* Herald-Tribune. *As it says on the back, the portrait was done 'on the LST that carried us to the Southern France invasion.' "*



Photograph courtesy of James "Jack" Hadley, CMSgt, USAF, (RET)