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"Versifying in Earnest"

Richard Wilbur's War and His Poetry

Among Richard Wilbur's many merits are skillful elegance, the intricate coherence of his art, his intelligence and wit, and, as Professor Brooker has pointed out, his "sacramental approach" to art and nature (529). I propose that Richard Wilbur's graceful craftsmanship and his rage for order within the lines of his work and in his vision of the world are, in part, a legacy of his World War II experience. His comments to Stanley Kunitz that "it was not until World War II took me to Cassino, Anzio, and the Siegfried Line that I began to versify in earnest" invites this thesis, a closer look at the details of his war, and speculation as to the effect of war on his poetic imagination (1808). His first book, *The Beautiful Changes*, includes eight poems that deal specifically with the war, and in them Wilbur realizes his observation that, "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" (1808).

Mr. Wilbur's biography tells us that he served as a cryptographer with the US Army's 36th Infantry Division in Africa, southern France, Italy, and along the Siegfried Line in Germany. What that notation doesn't tell us is the particular intensity of Richard Wilbur's combat experience with a notoriously "hard luck" infantry division and his use of poetry to organize that chaotic world. There is, I think, a profound connection between

Wilbur's war experience and the deep sincerity and polished formalism of his poetic work. His World War II experience not only helped define his view of the function of poetry in society, but it also contributed significantly to his unique poetic merit.

Richard Wilbur graduated from Amherst in the spring of 1942 and married Mary Charlotte Hayes Ward on June 20th. While on honeymoon in Maine, he learned that his number had come up in the draft. He enlisted for specialist training in the ready reserves, and he and Charlotte were able to have some time together before he went to war in Europe. Meanwhile, the division Wilbur would eventually join was originally composed of Texas National Guardsmen who lived in and around Denison, Texas. Sent to Camp Bowie, Texas, in November of 1940, Wilbur's World War II unit, the 36th Signal Company, began its training with its parent infantry division a year before Pearl Harbor. During 1941, it participated in the Texas and Louisiana Maneuvers and, in 1942, took part in the summer maneuvers in the Carolinas. Wilbur's prewar political views got in the way of his planned service in the intelligence community, and he was shipped overseas as a general replacement. He was able to join the 36th Signal Company—once he promised his new company commander that he would not "overthrow the government" while in his command—from a replacement depot near Naples while it was preparing for its move up to Cassino.[1]

Although he had missed the 36th division's convoy to Oran, Algeria and debarkation on 13 April 1943 (and consequently the intense combat on the beaches of Salerno, the first engagement of the enemy by US forces on the continent of Europe), Wilbur made it in time for subsequent hardship. The winter campaign through the Liri Valley toward Rome proved extraordinarily difficult and culminated in the battle for San Pietro (captured on

film in Major John Huston's "The Battle of San Pietro," considered by some to be the most authentic combat film ever made). On the nights of 20 and 21 January, the 36th suffered some of the heaviest losses in American military history trying to cross the icy Rapido River, and the final assaults on Cassino cost the division almost half of its combat strength before it was pulled out of the line to rest and reconstitute its units.

In May, Wilbur and the 36th Signal Company next saw action on the beaches of Anzio and the subsequent spearhead to Rome via the road to Velletri. The day before D-Day, 5 June 1944, Rome fell, and the 36th entered the eternal city as conquerors. Two months later, the 36th took part in amphibious landings in southern France and raced north to block the German retreat up the Rhone Valley. On the line for a record 133 days straight, the division finally got relief the day after Christmas when it replaced the 3rd Infantry Division at Strasbourg, but the respite was short. They hit the Siegfried Line in March, and Wilbur's company crossed the border into Germany on 20 March 1945. They moved through Kaiserslautern and on to the Bavarian Alps where they freed the inmates of the famed Landsberg prison and captured such Nazi notables as Hermann Goering and Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. And by May of 1945, three years after graduating from college, Richard Wilbur was in Austria, a staff sergeant cryptologist who had witnessed war from the belly of the whale.[2]

Richard Wilbur's poems that directly refer to the war have geographic and temporal connections to his experience with the 36th Infantry Division. Some of the connections are obvious. The poem "Tywater" describes the death of a simple, knife-throwing, lariat-roping Texan. Given that the 36th was originally a Texas National Guard unit, Wilbur had many such cowboys to model his common soldier after, but in fact, the roster of

the 36th Signal Company includes a Technical Sergeant Five Lloyd E. Tywater of Fort Worth, Texas. He probably was the same Tywater who was killed on the Anzio beachhead shortly after driving Wilbur to the front line to lay or gather wire. Mr. Wilbur said "he had the first name of Lloyd, though I never heard him spoken or referred to save by his last name."[3]

The poem tells us that "The violent, neat and practiced skill / Was all he loved and all he learned: / When he was hit, his body turned / To clumsy dirt before it fell" (*NCP* 342). It was an all too common fate to the fighting men of the 36th, and the poem is Wilbur's attempt to make sense out of the random and senseless loss of life that was all around him. One is reminded of James Dickey's Donald Armstrong in Dickey's poem "The Performance": "Doing all his lean tricks to amaze [his Japanese captors]— / The back somersaults, the kip-up— / And at last, the stand on his hands, / Perfect, with his feet together, / His head down, evenly breathing, / As the sun poured up from the sea" (58-59). Where Dickey ends his meditation of his slain airman friend with contemplation of his gymnastic and artistic perfection, Wilbur goes beyond reflection on human skill to invoke a God who "knows." Bruce Michelson claims that "Tywater" is "a wartime epitaph without an atom of consolation" (594). But I do not think that is true, for in Wilbur's wartime world God KNOWS and therefore there is REPOSE in the sense of poise and composure, and, unlike Dickey's world, "violence" recedes.

His vision of the modern battlefield depicted in "Mined Country" is especially prophetic given the contemporary international concern over the proliferation of land mines in areas of African conflict, the former Yugoslavia, and Cambodia. Contemplating the dangerous landscape and, perhaps, reflecting on the mine-clearing efforts he saw along the winter roads in the Liri Valley or

on the springtime march to Rome, Wilbur describes "Seeing the boys come swinging slow over the grass / (Like playing pendulum) their silver plates, / Stepping with care and listening / Hard for his metal's cry" (*NCP 343*). Wilbur goes on to speculate that the consequence of war is a natural world of lost trust: "We thought woods were wise but never / Implicated, never involved." Wilbur advises us in the postwar world to be wary, to adopt a stance that strikes a balance between verification and trust: "Tell him to trust things alike and never to stop / Emptying things, but not let them lack / Love in some manner restored; to be / Sure the whole world's wild." Wilbur accurately defines and optimistically embraces the paradox, captured in the image of men "playing pendulum," that was the period following World War II—an historic era of confidence and confusion, a time of great expectations under the shadows of nuclear annihilation. Wilbur encourages trust even in the face of compromised innocence, confidence despite the mined country and even nature's complicity. Out of his war experience, he embraces a fully confident but wary faith that love is "in some manner restored." The poem is a remarkably contemporary and durable testament of paradoxical faith and a suggestion of the proper frame of "mind" needed to survive in the Cold War era.

And it is Wilbur's ability to grasp the paradox of his war experience that sets him and his art apart from his peers. Cleanth Brooks reminds us that paradox is the fundamental element of poetic language, the *necessary* language of poetry. Wilbur's sense of paradox is present in the "Comical-delicate" poem "Potato," where Wilbur playfully puns on "savor" and "savior" and connects the unpretentious spud of the GI's kitchen police to Christ's tomb. Perhaps the "war-frozen gray / evening at window" provided Wilbur a view of the sacramental quality of that meek vegetable, "Awkward and milky and beau-

tiful only to hunger." War has a way of making us see the truth in the contradictory and absurd, and war, for Wilbur, helped him see what Clara Claiborne Park termed the "brilliant positive" in something even so lowly and absurd as the potato (Park 556).

In "Place Pigalle" Wilbur mimics the language of courtly love in a contemplation of a whore with "eyes as pale as air" and a "priestgoat" faced soldier, but even in this obvious parody, Wilbur conveys a deeper intellectual appreciation of paradoxical affinities between love and war (*NCP* 349). In the poem Wilbur is able to suggest sympathy for the soldier "boys with ancient faces" and women of "muchtouched flesh, incalculable" and leaves the reader to contemplate the paradoxical mystery of the restoration of life through erotic love, especially when that life is made immediately vulnerable and precious because of the threat of war.

The poem "On the Eyes of an SS Officer" played to mixed critical reviews but succeeds in capturing Wilbur's strongest emotions against those responsible for much of the suffering he observed on the line and among the 1,400 pathetic prisoners of the liberated Landsberg prison (ironically, the prison in which Adolph Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* twenty-three years earlier). The 36th Infantry Division's final area of operations were the mountains of Southern Germany, rumored to be the place where Hitler would gather his elite SS guard for a final stand that might drag on for over a year of heavy combat. SS Chief Henrich Himmler did, in fact, personally command his escort battalion and other forces against the 36th but suffered over 1,300 casualties in three days of fighting. The unveiled anger of the poem reminds one of General Eisenhower's uncharacteristically choleric comments to a young soldier who accidentally bumped into an Ohrdruf concentration camp ex-guard and giggled. "'General Eisenhower fixed him with a cold eye,' Patton's aide

Charles Codman wrote his wife, 'and when he spoke, each word was like the drop of an icicle. 'Still having trouble hating them?'" Eisenhower said (as quoted in Absug 30). Wilbur's unambiguous "damn his eyes" is a similar uncharacteristic response to the incarnation of evil wearing SS flashes (*NCP* 348).

But, as he told Stanley Kunitz, anger is an emotional response to war not central to the purpose of his poetry (1080). As critic Richard L. Calhoun points out, Wilbur's first collection, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems,* contains mostly "poetic exercises on how to face the problems of disorder and destruction" rather than "laments over the losses occasioned by the war" (452). Wilbur offers the most productive of the three aesthetic responses to war that I am about to discuss, and it is a response most fully expressed in what I believe is one of Wilbur's most effective poems, "First Snow in Alsace."

One view of war and art completely rejects the possibility of art to make sense out of combat. In *Dispatches,* Michael Herr tells a Vietnam story that he says took him a year to understand. "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened" (6). In *Brothers in Arms,* William Broyles Jr.'s personal quest for the meaning of war, he talks about a similar Civil War story told by veteran Captain Praxiteles Swan. "We all went up to Gettysburg, the summer of '63: and some of us came back from there; and that's all except the details" (195-96). Broyles explains that the "the language was different, but it is the same story. . . . I suffered, I was there. You were not. Only the facts matter. Everything else is beyond words to tell." We simply can't learn lessons about war from stories—you have to have been there; you have to have experienced it.

Another possible aesthetic response to war is Paul Fussell's sustained lament over the "irony of situation"

caused by the "melodramatically disproportionate" gap between the means and ends of war, an irony that he said made him a cynic (*Great War* 7). "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends" (*Great War* 7). Fussell quotes Stephen Ambrose's observation that, "The most extreme experience a human being can go through is being a combat infantryman" and adds, "[p]art of that experience involves, of course, intense fear, long continued. But another part requires a severe closing-off of normal human sympathy so that you can look dry-eyed and undisturbed at the most appalling things. For the naturally compassionate, this is profoundly painful, and it changes your life" (qtd. in *Doing Battle* 123).

On the other hand, Richard Wilbur did not come out of his war experiences a cynic. Another World War II veteran articulates a way of interpreting war's impact on the human spirit that helps explicate Richard Wilbur's aesthetic response to war. J. Glenn Gray received in the mail his doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University and his draft notice for WWII on the same day. During his counter-intelligence service with three combat Infantry Divisions, he kept a diary of his war experience, and after fourteen years of teaching philosophy, he returned to Europe on a Fulbright fellowship, talked about WWII with Germans from all walks of life, and wrote *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle,* his attempt to make sense out of his experience in battle and to distill fundamental human responses to war. Although Fussell dismisses him as a "remote and insulated observer" of war (*Doing Battle* 292), J. Glenn Gray concludes his meditation with a fervent plea for man to recognize in combat "dimensions of human nature both above and below the acceptable standards for humanity" and to recover a lost but "important dimension of our being, the disposition of

thankfulness, of commemoration, of perceiving and enjoying something for its own sake" (236). Gray's acceptance of war's paradoxes offers an alternative response to Fussell's ironic skepticism and insight into Wilbur's "versifying in earnest."

Gray claims that war can help us find the impulse to preserve and protect in the face of the overwhelming forces of destruction. Paradoxically, the natural bonds of comradeship forged in combat demonstrate that man has within him the capacity to work selflessly with others for peace. The opportunity for rare and genuine friendship ennobles the veteran, and the common bonds of respect and sympathy combat creates among enemies teach lessons about the impact of war on the human spirit and suggest future opportunities for cooperation and understanding.

In his poem "Beautiful Wreckage," W. D. Ehrhart, a Vietnam veteran, contemplates his war experience from Fussell's ironic and skeptical point of view. Ehrhart asks a series of questions about specific atrocities, "What if I didn't shoot the old lady / running away from our patrol, / or the old man in the back of the head, / or the boy in the marketplace?" (37) He wonders if the melodramatically inhuman experiences that occurred "between Con Thien and Da Nang" can somehow be grasped in art, if Con Thien can ever be a "place of angels" instead of "rats and mud." Ehrhart's answer is a resounding "NO!"

Ehrhart finds this world of war too terrible to accept; his spirit is forever wounded by his experience; and for him angels will never dwell in his world, only in his imagination. There is no paradoxical reconciliation of "beauty" and "war's wreckage" because the dead do not "rise up and walk." Like Fussell, Ehrhart in "Beautiful Wreckage" believes that all that art can honestly record is the melodramatic irony of the terrible toll war takes on

the human spirit. Wilbur rejects such cynicism in "First Snow in Alsace." The new snow changes things and "smoothly clasps the roof of homes / Fear gutted, trustless and estranged" (*NCP* 347). Wilbur, even in the wreckage that is war, can celebrate a sense of the regenerative goodness of the natural things of this world—the first snow promises some relationship between material and spiritual realms. "Persons and persons in disguise, / Walking the new air white and fine, / Trade glances quick with shared surprise."

There is a shock of recognition and an assurance of order revealed in and through the natural act of creation—opposed to man's act of destruction. His poem does not dwell on abstract despair but attempts to find in the desolate landscape transformed by first snow a hint of the "I-Thou" relationship of man to nature and natural things. Through the creative process, both in the natural world and in his poetry, Wilbur reconciles the paradox that is combat. In "First Snow in Alsace," Wilbur's childlike joy in nature's simple transformation of war's "beautiful wreckage" is a stark contrast to Ehrhart's agnostic irony. In the process of reconciling the paradoxes of war, Wilbur provides an example of how his experience may have affected the rest of his art. Cleanth Brooks says that Wilbur "does not retreat from this world and take refuge in an abstract order; rather, he accepts the things of this world as having their own powerful reality, but a reality reaches beyond themselves. . . . In fact, Wilbur's quiet reverence for the everyday things of this world is a dominant note in all his verse" (542). He was, indeed, the first to see in the "marvelous designs" the redemptive potential of first snow.

At the end of World War II, Richard Wilbur was a senior cryptologist. He had spent over two years of his life coding and decoding the day-to-day details of war, a quiet but essential service in an infantry division that ex-

perienced the worst that war could provide. In Italy, General Mark Clark credited cryptologists like Wilbur for making order out of the chaos at Anzio and saving hundreds of American lives (Kahn 33). Poetry, too, provided Wilbur "a momentary stay against confusion," and out of his ability to reconcile the paradoxes of World War II, Richard Wilbur discovered the sacramental in even things as simple as potatoes and first snow. With this unique ability to versify in earnest, Richard Wilbur continues to save lives in his careful coding and decoding of words. ❑

Notes

1. Cox, Joseph T. Interview with Richard Wilbur, October 1997.
2. This information is distilled from the Thirty-Sixth Signal Company Unit History on file in the National Archives. I read the history with the hope of finding Richard Wilbur mentioned in dispatches but found no such reference. However, the unit history and other associated documents (all written at the time of the actual events) provide a detailed summary of the time and place of Mr. Wilbur's war experiences.
3. Cox, Joseph T. Interview with Richard Wilbur, October 1997.

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