

— John Lancaster and Jack W. C. Hagstrom

Richard Wilbur's Early Writing

Amherst College and World War II

Richard Wilbur arrived at Amherst College in the fall of 1938, on the eve of World War II, at a time when events in Europe held ominous portent. He came to the small, prestigious college from a lively intellectual and artistic home, already a published writer and seasoned student editor. His first published poem, "Puppies," had appeared in *John Martin's Book: The Child's Magazine*, in September 1929; another, "Nightingales," was printed there in March 1930. Most of his subsequent published juvenilia consisted of prose: reports for camp newspapers in 1933 (Robin Hood Camp, Maine) and 1935 (Camp Glen Gray, New Jersey); a series of columns on the forthcoming Boy Scout Jamboree for the *Montclair [N.J.] Times* in 1935 (the Jamboree was cancelled for public health reasons); and a regular book review column (with a couple of other articles) in the *Scout Herald* in 1935-36. In 1937-38, his senior year in high school, he edited and wrote extensively for the school newspaper in Montclair, New Jersey, the *Mountaineer*, as well as almost single-handedly filling several issues of the local YMCA paper, the *Hi-Y News*.

One element found in much of Wilbur's early publication is cartooning, a talent which became even more prominent in his college work, and which eventually found mainstream publication in his *Opposites* and *More Opposites*. His cartoons are generally rounded and

humorous (somewhat reminiscent of Thurber in style), not hard or biting political comment.

As a freshman at Amherst, he joined the staffs of both *Touchstone* and the *Amherst Student*. The latter was and is the student newspaper; the former was a literary and humor magazine of which one of its editors, J. A. Walker, wrote: "The quality towards which we aim is the fiction of the *Yale Review*, the humor of the *New Yorker*, and the discussion of the *New Republic*."

In his sophomore year, Wilbur was invited to join the Amherst Political Union. This student group selected its own members; its aim was to expand the horizons of undergraduates by bringing distinguished visitors to campus, among them Eleanor Roosevelt, Louis Bromfield, and Archibald MacLeish. His involvement with the Political Union increased his exposure to a wide range of influential thinking on the most urgent problems of the time, and doubtless stimulated an already probing mind to greater focus on international issues, a focus reflected later in his college career when he became editor of the *Student*.

Wilbur's writing for *Touchstone* consisted primarily of a column, "Gambolling," begun in June 1939 at the end of his freshman year and continued through May 1941, the end of his junior year. Each column typically consists of several humorous short pieces and a few (usually related) cartoons, for the most part unrelated to the war (though one does focus on bad poetry inspired by the war). In addition, there was an occasional piece of short fiction and, most notably for our present focus, a very short closet drama entitled "War Aces" (with the subtitle "A Scenario Fraught with Emotion"). The piece might best be characterized as sophomoric (though it was written toward the end of his freshman year); it is set in Bucharest (or perhaps the "Place de Concorde [sic], Paris"—we are left uncertain) and contains exaggerated

British accents and references to the playing fields of Eton, Piccadilly Circus, and the like, as well as what can only be in-jokes no doubt understood by the undergraduates of the time. His senior contribution to *Touchstone* consisted of a few cartoons, only one of which (in the Commencement issue) touched on the war, showing an alumnus asking a new graduate which branch of the service he'd be entering.

Wilbur also wrote regularly for the student newspaper throughout his years at Amherst, and was a member of the editorial board, eventually rising to editor (or "chairman," as the paper's parlance has it). In addition to occasional cartoons (and a few humorous poems in his freshman year), he contributed articles on a wide range of topics—general reporting, in short—but with an emphasis on cultural affairs (including reviews of *Touchstone*, even while he was a regular contributor to that publication). It was in the *Amherst Student* that he first employed the column title "Mock Turtle" which reappears in use for his writings at the end of the war. Though the column appeared only half a dozen times—four at the end of his sophomore year, two in the spring when he was a senior—their contents accurately foreshadowed the eclecticism of those of 1945: pieces on poetry, movie comedies, misunderstanding of the blues by some critics, a review of a Dali-Miro exhibition at Smith College, jazz mysticism, and one article (in May of 1940) on the telling persistence of the minutiae of daily life even in the midst of the momentous events of wartime.

After his election as chairman of the *Student* in February of 1941 (editorial terms normally ran from mid-year to mid-year, to provide continuity), almost all of Wilbur's writing for the paper consisted of editorials. (Two "Mock Turtle" columns and a cartoon appeared after his term as editor.) One earlier editorial (of 4 March 1940) was entitled "If War Comes," accusing Amherst

undergraduates of willfully averting their eyes from the possibility, through "preoccupation rather than philosophy," and thus being "ethically unprepared" for the advent of war. In a further elaboration of the theme, "For the Record" (an editorial of 22 May 1941), he expanded his view to all of "youth": "This war, to us, has neither an idealist right nor an idealist wrong, it is simply more confusion. Our feelings at this time . . . are neither heroic, fanatical, hopeful or indignant. We are a flock of moral amoebas, a race of young animals to whom pessimism has become a natural and constant condition of mind."

Most of Wilbur's editorials during his tenure as chairman of the *Amherst Student* (spring 1941-fall 1942) touched in one way or another on the war and American attitudes toward it. His slant was uniformly toward a cautious, rational approach to the issues, recognizing an American stake in the war while resisting the growth of central government power and emotional interventionism on one side, and isolationism on the other. An editorial on poetry ("Short Lament for Some Poets") suggested a "return to the sonnet, or at any rate a shift to the use of the couplet in topical verse," as a reaction to "the conviction that the spheres of politics and emotional verse are coextensive."

As Wilbur neared the end of his tenure, the situation changed dramatically, though his approach to it did not. His editorial of 8 December, "Now That We Are In It," was a sober and intellectual analysis, calling for "unanimity and determined action" and already looking to a postwar world "more hopeful and less combustive than the world of the past twenty years." On 11 December, his editorial "A Word to the Alumni" picked up on the theme of continuing daily life despite the enormity of broader events, arguing that the academic life must continue, that "we must keep working, living the essence of our way of life—the right to freedom of inquiry." His

stance was not universally popular; the negative response moved him to reprint the war editorial that had appeared in the student paper of Amherst's arch-rival, Williams College, which he had characterized as "rhapsodiz[ing] over our intervention."

After Wilbur's graduation in the spring of 1942, we have no more published work until "Italy: Maine," which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* of 23 September 1944. He described the circumstances of its publication more than fifty years later:

I can't remember where I wrote it, but I V-mailed it to Charlee, the "you" of the poem, at a time when she was visiting her mother at the family place in South Berwick, Maine. The poem found its way into the *Saturday Evening Post* because Charlee showed it to her old schoolmate, Betsy List, then employed at the *Post*, and Betsy thought it ought to be published. When Charlee sent the result to me in Italy, I didn't greatly mind that the *Post* had promoted or excused the poem by surrounding it with patriotic stars and identifying the poet as a soldier. But it angered me that, in addition to the "Italy" in the title, the editor felt a need to give it an ITALY date-line, and on top of that to tamper with my first line so as to say "Italy" yet again.

One of the books I carried with me throughout the war was a volume of Hopkins, and a number of my early poems, printed or unprinted, show the influence of his hypermetrical and rugged lines. The first line of "Italy: Maine," before the *Post* got to work on it, was

Here, the hot insolent airs go crowding
through

which is very rugged, but scannable as a pentameter. Evidently the *Post* found my line metrically hopeless, and so did not scruple to botch it altogether.

Other than this lone poem, Wilbur's published wartime writing consists entirely of prose written on duty. He revived the title "The Mock Turtle" for regular columns written for two unit newspapers in 1945 (only 13 of which have been located), and he wrote the brief *History of the 36th Signal Company, Message Center Section, in France, Germany, and Austria, August 15, 1944 – May 8, 1945*.

Wilbur's "Preface, Introduction or What-not" to the *History* gives a good sense of its flavor:

This isn't a diary, and it isn't a history. It does not pretend to be literary. The purpose of it is to help you remember the places you've been, the things you've seen and sweated out, and the guys you've shared time with. Just about everybody is mentioned somewhere, but of course I couldn't tell everything about everything. If this booklet enables you better to reconstruct your experiences in France, Germany and Austria, and thereby gives you pleasure, it will fulfill all its purpose. Good luck, gentlemen. —R P W

The book is organized chronologically, one chapter per month, and contains a map showing in broad outline the

route of the 36th Infantry Division from the southern coast of France to Kitzbühel.

Twelve of the "Mock Turtle" columns we have found appeared in *Robert Reveille*, self-described in June 1945 as "a daily newspaper edited and published for the men of the 36th Division Headquarters and Headquarters Company by the Public Relations Section," and in October of that year as "published five times a week for the men of the 36th Infantry Division. . . ." The thirteenth "Mock Turtle" we have found is in *T-Patch: 36th Division News*. (The title is taken from the division's shoulder patch, a bold "T" on a downward-pointing arrowhead.) There were certainly more such columns, but we have been unsuccessful in our efforts to locate copies of the issues that contain them, those published from late spring through fall of 1945. (Four more have come to light—see "Addendum" below.)

Nine of the *Robert Reveille* columns appeared from 22 June to 14 July 1945 and addressed diverse topics. On 22 June, Wilbur wrote of flamboyancy in the American military, which he saw largely confined to generals, concluding "the American military man must resign himself to being either colorlessly competent, or else comic. A pity." A day later, the topic was the use of concussion grenades for fishing, which he developed as a metaphor: "The soldier forgets how to take his time; he becomes used to grabbing. . . . He will rediscover . . . that he may visit a town without shooting his way in, court a woman without making her a blunt offer of tropical chocolate, . . . and catch fish without blowing their brains out." On 27 June, his essay on sartorial vanity in the military picked up on themes from the flamboyancy piece, again noting the freedom of generals, and concluding with a plea "to discard that shoddy strip of toweling which the Army, in dead seriousness, calls a necktie."

3 July saw a turn to more serious issues, with a discussion of the San Francisco conference that created the United Nations, focusing on "the mystery of sovereignty, that is, the mystery of where . . . the actual power lies. . . ." He notes that the U.N. lacks the power of sovereignty, deriving what power it does have from the "fear of disorder" among nations, and ends prophetically: "The United Nations intend to 'harmonize the actions of nations'; I suspect it will be an uneven, atonal sort of music, rather than close harmony." 6 July brought an attack on the use of war themes in advertising: "there is nothing very laughable about this war, and [its] gravity . . . should not be compromised by 'angling' it toward commercial products."

The darkest of the surviving columns appeared on 10 July, telling of the previous day's *Stars and Stripes* article about "a Nazi institution for the extermination of idiot children" in Kaufbeuren (where his unit was stationed for a time) which "continued serenely to operate in our midst." He alludes to the "[American] reluctance to imagine evil behind the enemy's amiable morning smile," also pointing out that there are "advocates of euthanasia for the insane in America," and concludes that the ideology that led to such practices is "something to be fought with the heart and the mind as well as with bullet and the bomb."

The following day's column (11 July) addressed the politics of the postwar era, commenting on a proposal for a veterans' organization, the membership of which would be limited to enlisted men. He sees "no reason for forming any kind of veterans' association at all," suggesting that the only common interest all soldiers have is "in getting the hell out of the US Army." The next day, 12 July, Wilbur uses E. M. Forster's story "The Machine Stops" as a springboard for negative comment on the growing opportunities to be spectators rather than par-

ticipants, even to the point of watching films on television rather than going out to the movies.

On 14 July, he picks up on the themes of flamboyance and sartorial vanity touched on in earlier columns, mocking excessive decoration in the US Army (in contrast to the British), a manifestation of "the tradition of bluster and bamboozle exemplified in Crockett, Barnum, and Patton," contrasting it unfavorably with "the tradition of great modesty, exemplified in Lincoln and Li'l Abner."

We have not been able to locate issues of *Robert Reveille* between 14 July and 18 October 1945. On 18 October, "The Mock Turtle" praises the BBC (dull, but quite often with educational intentions) in contrast to the Armed Forces Network, or AFN ("never educational, and . . . in a horribly uniform sort of way"). On 23 October, Wilbur turns again to postwar politics, taking up the issue of a bonus for veterans and suggesting that only its bonus policy kept the American Legion alive between the wars. He writes: "Since a bonus . . . would give a lot of money to a lot of men not seriously requiring it, the bonus is inferior to the government's relief and public works programs, which deal out the dough where it's most needed," and follows by conjuring up "the inevitable inflationary effect of 12,000,000 simultaneous payments. . . ."

Two days later, the topic is the mysteries of the demobilization process: Why are war brides, film stars, and baseball players being shipped home after limited service "while 100-pointers are taking root in repple-depples? . . . Don't try to understand it; it will just drive you batty. Of course, going batty might get you home. You may as well try it, because I can tell you that 91 points won't get you there very fast."

The only issue of *T-Patch* to include a "Mock Turtle" column that we have located so far is that of 28 Octo-

ber 1945. This one is about three times as long as the ones found in *Robert Reveille*, and discusses moral issues relating to the atomic bomb. "We have not begun to make an adjustment to the fact of atomic power, and indeed we seem now to be trying to forget its existence—a familiar dodge of humanity when confronted with the appalling. . . . We cannot suppress scientific knowledge, and from now on the world is living in an 'atomic age'; we may as well face it. . . . Let's therefore set out in a practical way to make a peace that will stick. Until we do, we are all under sentence of death."

Whether we even now have "a peace that will stick" is still debatable—and hotly debated—but we are still alive and able to affirm in some measure the vision of humane and civilized life that shows in Richard Wilbur's college and wartime writings, and that permeates the body of poetic and critical work he has produced since then. □

Addendum

After the ALA meeting at which this material was presented—indeed, after this paper was in the hands of the editor—four additional *Mock Turtle* columns from *T-Patch* surfaced, thanks to John J. Slonaker, Chief of the Historical Reference Branch of the US Army Military History Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, who kindly provided copies from their incomplete run of the journal.

On 15 July, the *T-Patch* column simply reprints the one that appeared in *Robert Reveille* on 11 July. (This may be true of other *T-Patch* "Mock Turtle" columns as well, since we have not located issues of *Robert Reveille* from around the same times.) On 12 August, Wilbur discusses the various reasons why the soldiers in this war are fighting, or at least what they believe they are fighting for, concluding that "we have more ideas about why we are fighting than any soldiers have ever

had" in this, "the most complicated war in history." His thrust is, not surprisingly, against simplistic rationalization.

In the next issue, 19 August, he offers "a short forceful Farewell Speech" for the use of those being sent home who might wish "the pleasure of . . . ticking off their taskmasters." Finally (at least with regard to the issues known to us), on 21 October Wilbur takes on "leg-art" or cheesecake pictures, using reference to a number of sources that were certainly obscure to his readership to elaborate on his point, that "American culture can rightly be characterized as sexually immature." (This column is mis-signed "R.R.W.", rather than the usual "R.P.W.", no doubt simply a typographic error.)

One further *T-Patch* "Mock Turtle" column must be mentioned, but only to ensure that it does not enter Wilbur's canon. On 4 November, an unsigned column appeared, accompanied by a drawing of a turtle on a soapbox. The drawing is signed "W.W.;" the column is unsigned. In a letter of 19 November 1997, Wilbur writes of the column: "I have my doubts about 4 November. The anti-German animus would accord with mine, but the writing doesn't sound quite like me; nor is the drawing mine. . . . I left the ETO (from Marseilles) on 13 November 1945. I suppose that the 4 November column could have been a swan song before I left Germany, but I think that the wisest thing is not to claim it."

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