Richard Wilbur: An Interview

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A former Poet Laureate of the United States—the second, in fact, to hold the position after Robert Penn Warren—Richard Wilbur is one of the eminent authors of this century and by most accounts the premier poet of the century's latter half. A native of New York City who grew up in North Caldwell, New Jersey, Wilbur enlisted in the US Army after his graduation from Amherst and served in World War II from 1943-45, reaching the rank of Staff Sergeant. During the war he served in southern France, along the Siegfried Line, and at Cassino and Anzio in Italy. Upon his return, he attended Harvard on the GI Bill and completed his MA degree, published his first book of poetry, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems* (1947), and embarked on a career of writing and teaching English at Wellesley, Harvard, Wesleyan, and Smith.

His work is wide-ranging. Among his ten books of poetry are *Things of this World: Poems* (1956), for which he won his first Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, *Walking to Sleep: New Poems and Translations* (1969) which won the Bollingen Prize, and his most recent *New and Collected Poems* (1989) which won a second Pulitzer Prize. He has additionally won the Bollingen Prize for his translation of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, has edited the poems of William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe, written a number of critical commentaries including an essay examining the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and composed (with Lillian Hellman) the lyrics for the comic opera *Candide*. His translations include a number of dramatic works by Racine and Moliere, many of which

have been performed on Broadway and in the English-speaking world generally.

This interview took place at Wilbur's summer residence in Cummington, Massachusetts in October 1997 and was conducted by Colonel Joseph T. Cox of the United States Military Academy. Wilbur talks about his World War II experiences and their influence on his poetry.

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Cox: As I said in my essay, I believe that your graceful rage for order and your vision of the world are, in part, a legacy of your World War II experience. To explore that thesis, I begin with a question about your 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. 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." How had your world gotten "out of hand"?

Wilbur: Well, as it became more and more likely that America would be involved in World War II, I resisted the draft for various reasons. I was inclined toward pacifism, for religious reasons, and had the cause been more dubious I might have ended as a C.O. Some of my teachers and much of my reading had also made me a potential war resister on political grounds. Add to these things the fact that I was clever with words and enjoyed making a stir, and it may be clear why, in my editorials for the *Amherst Student*, I was a sort of America-Firster until Pearl Harbor put an end to all smart-ass debate. When it was clear that the American involvement was necessary and just, and that I was going to be in it, I didn't think of getting into some ninety-day-wonder program [officer

training], because I had a romantic preference for being a common soldier and because, never having been much of a team player, I was not drawn to being a leader of men. If I had to go to war, it would be as a specialist. At some point—I can't say just when—I took a course in cryptography from the US government, and that was one specialty I knew a bit about. In June of '42 I took a telegraph key on my honeymoon, and my new wife and I practiced Morse code together, in a pleasant cabin on the Maine coast. After six months of ERC training in all aspects of radio communications, I then reported for duty, and you know the rest of my story.

I've told you all that in order to answer your question about how, with World War II, my world had "gotten out of hand." No doubt war is disturbing and disorienting for everyone, civilians included; it cancels one's plans and alters the playing field; it calls for sacrifice and for degrees of discipline and physical courage less required in peacetime. It also puts the future of one's country and civilization in doubt. Some people, however, come into their own in time of war, and I was not one of those. To find myself in the Army was a shock to my antiwar youth, my anti-militarism, my dislike of regimentation; and once I was in a combat unit, the war challenged my sanguine suppositions about human nature and the goodness of God's world. On the positive side, I learned a lot about loyalty, mutual dependence and something I had never expected to experience—espirit de corps.

Cox: Much has been written about the embittering process that is war. Many memoirists, poets, and writers of fiction say that the military destroyed their idealism. You seem to draw contrary conclusions. What was the difference in your experience from others?

Wilbur: My uncle Fred's letters from the trenches, in World War I, were full of the sort of zeal and noble conviction that can lead to disillusion—though that didn't happen to him. My generation went into World War II in a more realistic and less crusading spirit, resolved to do what plainly had to be done; and so there was less damage to our expectations. It may be that the literature of World War I, which told of so much beastliness and stupid waste of lives, prepared us to be not altogether surprised.

Cox: What do you mean by the phrase "versify in earnest"? How did your war experiences transform your attitude toward poetry? How did the chaos of war affect your poetics?

Wilbur: Poetry seems to me a serious game in which one tries to be fully articulate about self and world. If both have been shaken up, one's old vocabulary will not suffice; one needs to find new and risky words with which to express one's confusion, and thus begin to order it. That's what "versifying in earnest" (a mock-pompous expression) amounts to, and "Mined Country" or "First Snow in Alsace" would represent that sort of seriousness. I could also explain the expression "versifying in earnest" in terms of concentration; poetry, as many soldiers discovered during World War II, was the art which could most readily be practiced under the circumstances. You can't set up an easel in a foxhole. With a pencil and a piece of paper, poetry could help you at once to escape the situation and to master it. If you wanted to order and express the life you were living, you were likely to concentrate earnestly on poetry.

In regard to technique and structure, I was not inclined to fall into "the fallacy of imitative form" and write chaotically about chaos. The war didn't change my

sense of what a good poem was or what forms might be adequate to the matter at hand. My adjustments had to do with the inclusion of words and of kinds of experience.

Cox: Is there any poetry that you wrote before your war experiences that you would dare share with today's audience?

Wilbur: Before World War II made me focus fervently on poetry, I had practiced a variety of arts. I had written most kinds of journalism and expected to make a career of that; it was in our family tradition on my mother's side. I'd done political cartooning, in the veins of Kirby and Fitzpatrick and Art Young, and rather fancy color cartoons in the manner of the old *Vanity Fair*, and comic strips, too, which had some of the quality of *Krazy Kat*. I had a guitar and was an artless folksinger who knew 60-odd verses of "Frankie and Albert." As for poems, I had written them since my earliest years because I was a wordy kid and a reader, influenced from the beginning by Mother Goose, by a volume called *Poems of American Patriotism*, by Lear and Belloc, and in adolescence by Hart Crane, Robert Frost, and many others. But it was just one of the things I did, growing up in the house of a painter where any sort of art was encouraged. Many of my early poems have been lost, and I'm not inclined to share those which have survived because they belong to the time before I wrote poems "in earnest" and was on my way to outgrowing my influences.

Cox: What poems did you write during the war? How did you write them? With whom did you share them? Were there other poets or soldiers in the ranks who appreciated your verse?

Wilbur: Of course I wrote many poems during the war which didn't seem good enough to include in my first book. Looking through that book, I'd say that the following were written during my time in the army. "Cicadas" (originally "Cigales"), "Water Walker" (prompted, I think, by a life of St. Paul which I read while in the service), "Tywater," which concerns a corporal in my company who was killed on the Anzio beachhead shortly after delivering me at our front line. "Mined Country," "Potato," "First Snow in Alsace," "On the Eyes of an SS Officer," "Place Pigalle," "June Light," "Lightness," "Caserta Garden."

During the war I composed poems with a pencil and any available bit of paper, as I still do; when our code room—sometimes an actual room, sometimes a cellar, sometimes a 6 x 6 truck—was idle, I'd type them up on a code machine. I sent all my poems home to my wife by V-mail and sometimes sent them to an old friend from college or to one of my Amherst teachers. I very seldom entertained the thought of publication. One poem of mine was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* because my wife's school-friend Betsy List was working for the magazine. At some time I sent "Potato" to the English magazine *Horizon*, and it was graciously declined.

I almost never showed a "serious" poem of mine to my fellow-soldiers in the 36th; one of them, a Jewish fellow from New Jersey, once handed a poem back to me, saying "I'm sorry, Dick, but my attitude is poetry, schmoetry." The other guys knew, of course, that I wrote highbrow poetry and carried Gerard Manley Hopkins in my musette bag, but that didn't make me *very* different, in their eyes, from the thousands of other soldiers who appeared in the "Puptent Poets" column of the *Stars & Stripes*. The other guys *did* like my light verse and my cartoon illustrations, and I had warm and amusing rela-

tionships with almost everyone, partly because, being mostly country Texans, they were enjoyers of words—good storytellers and inventive cussers.

Cox: Do you remember any phrases used by those "inventive cussers" that we could repeat in a literary journal? Were there unique language patterns in the cussing that made it into or influenced your poetry?

Wilbur: Obscenity is usually pretty dull, but the people in my company made continual inventive variations on the fundamental foul expressions and so kept things light and amusing. There was a considerable value placed on good rhythm, fresh locutions, and narrative ability, and ordinary talk could have a crazy playfulness in it. I fondly remember a Mexican-American corporal who pulled a chair out from under me, so that I crashed to the floor, and who then said, in parody of God knows what, "I only sought to amuse; have I failed?" It was good for a writer to pass the war with people who had fun with the language.

Cox: How did the war affect your appreciation of nature? How did it affect your heightened sense of the sacred in the everyday?

Wilbur: I am not philosophic enough, or self-conscious enough, to be able to trace the development of my ideas and attitudes; I don't so much put them into poems as look and see what comes out—what notions have managed to emerge from the pressure-cooker of a poem. But of course the war did make me aware of the violence and perversity of man and nature and made it a necessity to acknowledge those things while looking to reaffirm the sacramental in the world.

Cox: How did the war affect your imagination and art after the war was over? Were there specific events or experiences in the war that found their way into specific poems? Is, for example, a poem such as "The Death of a Toad" informed by the kind of stoicism that you saw in men dying during the war? Are there poems that on the surface don't appear to be "war poems" but in fact are?

Wilbur: In the poems of my second book, I see "The Pardon" as resolving not to evade death and "Marché aux Oiseaux" as resolving not to deny the darker side of love itself, and I think I could find many poems throughout my writing life which, though I finally tend to affirm, acknowledge the worst and are thus continuous with my war experience and are "war poems" regardless of subject.

Cox: When did you first see yourself as a poet? How did the war help define you in that role? Would you have pursued a career as a poet had you not served in WWII? What kind of poet would you have been had you never served overseas during WWII?

Wilbur: Robert Frost once answered the frequently asked question "When do you know that you're a poet?" by saying, "It's when somebody sends you a ten-dollar check for a poem." That no doubt sounded cynical to some people, but I think we must not look down on that ten-dollar check; it says that your work has given pleasure to an editor and may be of some emotional or imaginative value to the readers of some magazine. The unexpected acceptance of my first batch of poems by the publishing house of Reynal & Hitchcock made me think that poetry might be my calling, and since then I have been confirmed in that belief by every out-of-the-blue letter which has told me that a poem has been used at a wed-

ding, or at a burial, or at the bedtime of some lonely person—that I have been of use. The war challenged me to organize a disordered sense of things and so prepared me to write a poetry of maximum awareness and acknowledgment, but of course I can't say how I'd have written had I never gone to war. No doubt there are other fruitfully disordering experiences.

Cox: How did your wartime service affect your relationship with your contemporaries? Were there other veteran poets with whom you shared ideas and art? Who do you think are the best poets to come out of WWII? In general, what effect, if any, do you think wartime experiences have on artistic vision?

Wilbur: Most of my contemporaries were in one or the other branch of the service during World War II; one or two were C.O.s. Of those who wrote some good poems out of the war experience—Eberhart, Hecht, Jarrell, Nemerov, Shapiro, Simpson, Ciardi—some saw action and some did not. Proximity to the front was not important, and whether one served on the ground or—like Meredith and Booth—in the air had nothing to do with the quality of the poems that came of it. Imagination, and not firsthand reporting, was what mattered. In general, I would say that good World War II poetry did not prettify or ennoble war and did not on the other hand repudiate it in horror, as much World War I poetry had done; positive human qualities were celebrated, the dreadfulness was faced, the war was regarded as obligatory. The poets of World War II wrote from within the war effort of the free (or anti-Axis) powers, and most of us were uncritical of the bombing of German cities and stupefied but relieved by Hiroshima. Given the viciousness of the Axis states, the necessity that they be defeated, and our wish to save our skins, such obtuseness may be excused.

Cox: What is your favorite literature which comes from the WWII experience? Who are the artists who make the best use of their war experience?

Wilbur: The poets I've just named (and some others, no doubt, who didn't come to mind) weren't "war poets," but good poets who had some war experience and then went on to write of other things. I think that all of them, in individual war-poems which I prize, did justice to what they saw and underwent. I haven't read many prose histories of the war. Even though I was involved as a soldier in communications, I was like most enlisted men (and like Stendahl's Fabrice) in having a very fragmentary grasp of the Big Picture; but I haven't repaired that ignorance by becoming a buff of World War II. I've read a few books like Fred Majdalany's book on Cassino and let it go at that. As for prose fiction, I've read Mailer and Jones with respect and enjoyed the jokes of Joseph Heller, but the war novels to which I've returned with great pleasure are those of Evelyn Waugh. There's at least one book of Paul Fussell's that I look forward to reading because I've relished his writing on other subjects. I enjoyed Bill Manchester's accounts of his Marine landings in the Pacific.

Cox: Of course Paul Fussell, too, is a World War II veteran, but his experience made him very bitter about the disproportionate ends and means of war. Other veterans seem to see beyond Fussell's brand of pessimism and can see both the beauty and the horror of war, the best and the worst in human nature in war. Is that too easy a generalization?

Wilbur: I remember Manchester telling me about John Wayne visiting an assembly of marines who hissed him. That was perhaps their way of saying "you took us in."

Of course, it depends a great deal on what happens to you. If you step on a land mine, that's going to be a significant challenge to your effort to find something positive in war.

Cox: What was the transformation like from military to civilian life? Were you starving for art when you were discharged? Do you think there was anything special about your generation of soldiers that made them different from Vietnam veterans?

Wilbur: With my mustering-out pay of $441.11, and with the promise of monthly GI Bill checks, my wife and I went straight to Harvard and its graduate school. Like the many other returning veterans there, I plunged into literary studies and worked my head off—not to forget the war, but because I was spoiling to make full use of my specific talents. I have never since known an academic atmosphere in which there was so much high-spirited avidity for art and knowledge.

Movies about World War II often made much of the socially varied composition of an infantry patrol, and I think that it was true of all our armed forces that they drew upon every group and class. My impression is that the dreadful Vietnam war was largely fought by the unprivileged while those with educational deferments made antiwar protest an excuse for every kind of self-righteous self-indulgence.

Cox: Looking back on your war experience, can you point to any work of literature that helped you cope? How did it prepare you for the nature of war? Was there any book or poem that you read as a youth that totally had it wrong? Have you written anything that would help someone who might have to endure war?

Wilbur: I don't think that the laudations of martial courage in *Poems of American Patriotism* gave me false expectations of war or of myself, or that such novels as Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* or the poems of Owen and Sassoon were a practical preparation for our rather different world war. But I think that *all* literature—what I'd read of it anyway—had somewhat prepared me to cope with war experience as it came. One needs words and concepts to take the measure of things, and achieve some clearness and balance, and not be mutely overwhelmed.

Cox: What were your views of the Korean and Vietnam Wars? Were the poems that you wrote during those conflicts informed or influenced by your own wartime experience?

Wilbur: During the Korean, War I was working hard as an apprentice teacher at Harvard or working hard (under a Guggenheim grant) as a writer in an adobe house on the New Mexican desert. I followed the news from Korea but didn't have strong views about it. I opposed the war in Vietnam way back when the French were fighting it and continued to oppose it when the US sought to suppress a national liberation movement in the name of "stemming the spread of communism." It seemed to me an unjust war by every Augustinan criterion. I wrote and spoke to that effect. At the same time, I detested the behavior of many student protesters and that of their gurus in the academy and in the nation. Such references as my poems made to the Vietnam mess ("On The Marginal Way," "For the Student Strikers," the Johnson sonnet) were related to my own wartime experience in one way only: I had taken part in a just war, but this was different.

Cox: What do you think about what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (what the military establish-

ment called "battle fatigue" during WWII)? Did it occur? Did you know any soldiers who suffered "battle fatigue"? Did you experience anything like it?

Wilbur: Our division may have had more days in combat than any other in the ETO; I don't know whether that's true, but I've heard it said. In any case, I believe that there came a day during the Battle of the Bulge when some of our exhausted line company soldiers had to be begged to get out of their foxholes. I couldn't possibly blame them. Is that what "battle fatigue" means? Our signal company didn't have it as hard as the line company soldiers did, but we were shelled and shot at, and we took our losses. It is difficult—stressful—to do a technical job like wire-laying or radio transmission or the encoding of messages in close proximity to a firefight. The man I replaced, just before Cassino, had gone home with a "section eight," and I confess that I once found myself banging my head against an iron safe. But that's as close as I came to the edge.

Cox: You served in World War II with the 36th Infantry Division, a unit that was known as a "hard luck" outfit that suffered especially heavy casualties in the Italian campaign. Ernest Hemingway in his WWII novel *Across the River and into the Trees* makes a brief allusion to the 36th's difficulty at the Rapido River. Did you ever hear any of your fellow soldiers in the division talk about the failed Rapido River crossing? If any fellow soldiers talked about that battle, did they feel betrayed by their leadership, or did they take that defeat personally? What do you think of General Mark Clark's leadership?

Wilbur: The Division had lost a great many troops at Salerno and San Pietro before I ever joined it; on top of that, the losses at the Rapido were staggering. But I

never heard anyone say at the time that a *difficult* crossing had been ill-planned by the divisional command or that an *impossible* crossing had been ordered by Mark Clark in deference to higher-ups who felt that there would be psychological advantages to taking Rome before such and such a date. Those conflicting views—and others—were never heard by me until after the war. I suspect that ordinary soldiers don't usually know, in a broad strategic sense, what the hell is going on and so don't do a lot of informed criticizing. One thing we all thought we knew, by the way, was that the Germans were violating the Geneva Convention by using the monastery tower as an O.P. But apparently that wasn't so; I was told as much at a luncheon in Cambridge by a trustworthy German who had been up on that hill when I was down in the Valley.

Cox: If you could influence the United States military today, what advice would you give its senior leadership? What role should art play in the professional development of military leaders?

Wilbur: I am not close enough to the military life to be entitled to have an opinion of what is needed. I am sure that art should play the role in the development of everybody, and I am sure it has advantages for people in the military as well as in all professions.

Cox: Having lived through WWII, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the Cold War, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the development of world civilization? Where does art go from here?

Wilbur: I guess that I am optimistic because I am helplessly optimistic; it is my nature to be so. I am perfectly aware that we could do ourselves in very easily given the

number of warheads that are still there in Russia and are far more vulnerable to misuse than they were before. And I suppose that the Russians are not the only potential villains in that matter. Still, I hope that we have enough sense to survive the invention of the atomic bomb.

Art will go on to have all of the functions it has always had. It seems to me that art does not commence in a nuclear age to have a different character and use than it had before. I suppose it's true that as civilization has developed art has become less and less obviously functional. One thinks of the way poetry initially was simply integrated into the lives of the tribal people and was meant to remind them of their histories, of their myths, and of their values. I think poetry nowadays, in our supposedly advanced society, does that sort of thing still but less obviously and with more variation and uncertainty. It is still the main part of the job of poetry to celebrate our collective values as far as that can be done and to tell us stories about how we got here. ❑

Editor's Note: *Taken somewhere in Europe, this photograph of Richard Wilbur was the work of an Army photographer and intended for the home-front newspapers. The adjacent poem first appeared in* The Saturday Evening Post *(Philadelphia), 217:13 (23 September 1944) 37. The* Post *editors changed the first line to begin "In Italy." At the author's request, the poem has been restored to the original text.*