

Poetic Patriarch

The singular Richard Wilbur displays
a “Mozartean felicity” with verse.

During the extended World War II battle of Monte Cassino, Richard Wilbur spent a lot of time in a foxhole. The Germans had pinned down his army division in a valley, firing their 88s from the hills above. “As Waugh said, a lot of war is just waiting around,” says Wilbur, who used that waiting time to read Edgar Allan Poe, among others, and to write poems. Years later, he observed that if there were no atheists in foxholes, there were plenty of poets. “Poems were a way of putting your world in order, a bit,” he explains.

Wilbur, A.M. '47, JF '50, sent one of those battlefield poems to his wife, Charlee, who showed it to a friend who was an editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*. The magazine immediately published it. Wilbur mailed many more poems home; when he left the army, he had \$400, a wife and daughter to support, and a stack of wartime poetry. On the GI Bill, he enrolled in a Harvard doctoral program in English literature. “I figured I’d become a great scholar of Europe in the seventeenth century,” he recalls. The stack of poems, joined by others that he continued to write, grew in a desk drawer.

In Cambridge, the Wilburs became friends with André du Bouchet, A.M. '46, a Frenchman who helped found a little literary magazine called *Foreground*. “We used to sit around in a living room translating each other from French into English, and English into French,” Wilbur remembers. “At that time, I hadn’t taken myself seriously as a professional poet.” But Charlee had. Without telling her husband, she gave some of his poems to du Bouchet. “He came back in an hour and kissed me on both cheeks,” says Wilbur, “and he exclaimed, ‘You’re a poet!’”

During the next six decades, the rest of the world has come to share du Bouchet’s opinion. Wilbur has published 10 volumes of poetry, as well as many translations: of classic French plays and of poets writing in French, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian. He served as poet laureate of the United States from 1987 to 1988. His third book, *Things of This World*, won the 1956 Pulitzer Prize in poetry and the National Book Award; when his *New and Collected Poems* won another Pulitzer in 1989, he became the only living American poet with two Pulitzers. In a 2004 *New Yorker* review of

Wilbur’s *Collected Poems 1943-2004*, critic Adam Kirsch '97 wrote, “No other twentieth-century American poet, with the possible exception of James Merrill, demonstrates such a Mozartean felicity in the writing of verse. This is partly a matter of formal mastery: Wilbur has written the best blank verse of any American poet since Frost.”

NEAR THE FAIRGROUNDS in the western Massachusetts town of Cummington, a gently winding country road leads to the modern yet rustic home, across from a dairy farm, where Wilbur has lived since 1965. He manages alone now, with a modicum of domestic help; Charlee passed away in 2007 after a long illness. Near the house rises a barn-like studio, where the poet, now 87, writes daily; on its walls are framed theatre posters from plays on which he has worked, including *The Misanthrope* (translator) and *Candide* (lyricist).

The wooded 80-acre property is serene on a summer afternoon. Thriving gardens, a tennis court, and a sparkling aqua-blue swimming pool surround the house, and an older white Mercedes rests placidly in a curving driveway under a porte-cochère. These are not the digs of a starving poet.

In many ways Wilbur has led a charmed life. Tall, robust, and cheerful, he’s a physically active man who swims and gardens, and has been for much of his life an accomplished tennis player. He and Charlee had “the closest kind of marriage,” according to their longtime friend Daniel Aaron, Thomas professor of English and American literature emeritus. The marriage produced one daughter, Ellen, a writer (see page 40), and three sons, Christopher, Nathan, and Aaron, none of whom has entered the lit-

by Craig Lambert



"You can be a scholar if you like, but I assure you that

erary life. Wilbur is a lover of jazz and a great joker who draws Thurber-like cartoons. A cryptographer in the army, he enjoys puzzles and vanquishes books of crosswords in odd moments.

Wilbur's strong feeling for plants, animals, and natural phenomena infuses many of his poems. Rural life has always appealed to him; though born in New York City, he grew up on the gentleman's farm of a retired English textile manufacturer in North Caldwell, New Jersey: "All the benefits of country living, without the labor," he says. It was not an arty home, but Wilbur recalls, "If you wrote anything, drew anything, or played any instrument, it was approved of. That was better than an atmosphere of exhortation." His father was a portrait painter ("All he wanted to do was paint") and his mother came from a long line of journalists; when Wilbur edited the student paper at Montclair High School in New Jersey and later at Amherst College, from which he graduated in 1942, he wrote everything from reports on wrestling matches to editorials, news, and features, and drew cartoons. "I thought I might follow a family tradition and be a multiple-threat journalist," he says.

But he also published a few poems in those student papers, and as a teenager listened to Robert Frost reading his own poems at the Montclair Women's Club, the first time Wilbur had ever heard a poet read to an audience. (Later, he learned that Charlee's grandfather, clergyman William Hayes Ward, was the first person to publish a Frost poem, in the *New York Independent*.)

When he arrived in Cambridge in the fall of 1946, "the flavor of Harvard was quite intoxicating, because of the great influx of former servicemen on the GI Bill," Wilbur says. "People were really spoiling to read, write, and talk about literature and the arts. They were starved, and just giddy with the transition. Everyone felt lucky." Archibald MacLeish, Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory, was soon to teach a poetry

course, and talented young poets like Maxine Kumin '46, A.M. '48, John Ashbery '49, Robert Creeley '49, Frank O'Hara '50, Robert Bly '50, Donald Hall '51, and Adrienne Rich '51 populated the classrooms. Wilbur studied Poe with Hall, and notes that even though "Bly never took a course with me, I did teach him how to throw a boomerang. I took him down to the football field, gave him his instructions, and he turned out to be a promising boomeranger."

Wilbur's first big break came when André du Bouchet sent some of his early work to the publishing firm Reynal & Hitchcock, which was on the lookout for new talent. "Soon I had a phone call saying, 'Mr. Wilbur, we'd like to publish a book of your poetry,'" he recalls. "That's the most painless path to getting a book published I've ever heard!" The result was *The Beautiful Changes* (1947).

In December 1948, Wilbur sent the *New Yorker* a poem called "Year's End." Soon, *New Yorker* editor Katherine S. White was on the phone. "Mr. Wilbur, we want to use your poem in our year-end issue," she said. "There's no time to send you proofs, so we'll have to talk through it on the phone." Wilbur quickly assented. "You don't seem to have any understanding of the difference between *which* and *that*," she began. "I don't at all," Wilbur admitted. "*Which* sounds like a brisk word and *that* is a soft-sounding word." White replied, "Fowler [author of *Modern English Usage*] wouldn't find that acceptable," then added, "But Fowler was British, wasn't he, and we're an American magazine, so we'll let it go."

Fortune soon smiled on him again. He had taken his language exams in German and was on his way to a Harvard doctorate when, after only one year of postgraduate study, "by tremendous luck, I was taken into the Society of Fellows." Professor of history and literature F.O. Matthiessen and English professor Harry Levin, a senior fellow of the society, backed him for the prestigious fellowship, which gave him free

The Writer

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

The poetry is enough."



rein for independent study at Harvard from 1947 to 1950. *The Beautiful Changes* appeared just as his fellowship began. "I was always torn between scholarship and writing poems," he says, "so I had a confusion about who I was. The happiest moment was when [McLean professor of ancient and modern history] Crane Brinton, who chaired the Society of Fellows, told me, 'You can be a scholar if you like, but I assure you that the poetry is enough.' That was liberating for me to hear."

At that time, Wilbur says, "Harvard regarded a three-year stretch in the Society of Fellows as the equivalent of a doctorate," and consequently he was appointed assistant professor of English in the fall of 1950. He taught a seminar on Poe, a class in modern American and English poetry, and a writing class on the short story; he also assisted University Professor I.A. Richards in an experimental freshman humanities course. The literary resurgence that had thrilled Wilbur after the war was intensifying. Poetry readings were suddenly popular. "Before the late 1940s, there hadn't been too many people trotting around America giving poems in auditoria," Wilbur points out. "Suddenly, quite young poets like me had frequent opportunities to read."

When Wallace Stevens '01, Litt.D. '51, first read at Harvard in the late 1940s, "No one had imagined what kind of audience he would draw," Wilbur recalls. Stevens was scheduled to read in Emerson Hall, but an hour beforehand, "F.O. Matthiessen poked his head in the door and saw that the room was full," so he moved the venue to Sever; it soon overflowed, forcing the audience to shift once more, to the Fogg Museum's auditorium. "I remember how shocked Stevens looked when he saw the size of the audience," Wilbur adds. When T.S. Eliot '10 lectured in

Sanders Theatre, "Those who arrived late beat on the doors, shouting, 'Let us in! Let us in!'"

Wilbur's *Ceremony and Other Poems* appeared in 1950; he dedicated it to his mentor Matthiessen, who leapt to his death from a Boston hotel window that year. The New Critics, who reigned in the literary establishment of that time, welcomed the book. "I was very fortunate," Wilbur says. "Of course I had my refusals, but I was greatly encouraged from the beginning. Encouragement is different from adulation, which could louse you up: it could lead you to change your tune."

One early encourager was Robert Frost '01, Litt.D. '37, whom Wilbur cites as an inspiration. After the war, Frost spent some winters living in Cambridge, on Riedesel Street, off Brattle Street; Wilbur got to know him there and also at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont. Later, Frost dined and stayed with the Wilburs. "When my first book came out, Frost spoke very kindly of it to my wife—not to me—over the phone," Wilbur says. "I was aware that he read what I wrote as it came out. The first time he praised a specific poem was when I published 'The Puritans.' At Dartmouth, he told me, 'That's the best little poem I've seen in quite a while.' I was so flustered that I began saying something about the poem, but Frost interrupted to say, 'Now, wait—if you're going to explain it to me, I won't like it anymore.' Frost didn't like his poems, or any poems, to be put into other words."

In 1950, Wilbur was among the founders of the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge. Other prime movers included Ashbery, Hall, O'Hara, MacLeish, Peter Davison '49, Edward Gorey '50, Alison



Visit harvard-mag.com/extras to hear Richard Wilbur read his poem "The Writer."

Lurie '47, and Richard Eberhart, G '33. (The Poets' Theatre staged plays until 1968, when fire destroyed its home on Palmer Street; it revived in 1988 and remains active today.) The group's productions ranged from *Change Your Bedding*, a comedy by O'Hara (whom Wilbur recalls as "breezy and amusing"), to a couple of MacLeish's radio plays from the 1930s, to a staging of *Oedipus at Colonus* in the original Greek. "It was a time of great liveliness, excitement, and innovation," says Wilbur, who finds himself bemused "when people speak dismissively of the 1950s, as if they had been a tame and suppressed time, and everything began with Allen Ginsburg."

In 1955, the Poets' Theatre produced Wilbur's translation of *The Misanthrope* by Molière, with Davison playing the lead. The play proved such a hit that after two nights, the production moved to a big auditorium at MIT. His *Misanthrope* translation soon led to Wilbur's most famous collaboration, with Lillian Hellman and Leonard Bernstein '39 on *Candide*, the 1956 Broadway musical based on Voltaire's novella.

Hellman conceived the idea of staging *Candide* and enlisted Bernstein to write some music. Several writers, including Dorothy Parker and James Agee '32, John Latouche, Bernstein and his wife, Felicia, and Hellman, contributed lyrics. But Wilbur became the primary lyricist ("I wrote or rewrote 82.5 percent of the lyrics," he says—not facetiously, but following his theatrical agent's calculation) after Harry Levin recommended him to Hellman, citing his work on *The Misanthrope*. "If he can do one witty Frenchman," Levin said, "I imagine he could do another."

In the summer of 1955, all the principals rented houses on Martha's Vineyard and worked on *Candide* each day, typically meeting at Bernstein's place, with him at the piano. "We all thought we had singing voices," Wilbur recalls, smiling. Each time Hellman wrote a scene, the others would make it into a musical number, transforming *Candide* from a play to a comic op-

eretta. "Lenny was full of energy and urgency," Wilbur says. "He and I quarreled occasionally as to whether the music or words should be written first. One time I wrote a very good lyric, the closest thing to Voltaire, and Lenny couldn't think of a tune for it. After a few days, director Tyrone Guthrie chided him, saying, 'Lenny, we know you were water-skiing yesterday, not trying to produce a tune for Richard's lyric.'" (Bernstein found a melody.)

Candide opened to favorable reviews, "but the praise, by Brooks Atkinson [17] in the *New York Times*, for example, made it sound too highbrow for block-ticket buying," Wilbur says. The show closed after a three-month run. "The main defect of the show is the defect of *Candide*," he observes. "It's the same joke over and over." Though technically a flop, *Candide* has triumphed in the long run, thanks to a continuing series of revisions and revivals. Wilbur collects royalties whenever its overture is played, and occasionally still gets requests for new lyrics. (Dick Cavett's television show used the aria "Glitter and Be Gay" as theme music.)

In the mid 1960s, he collaborated with the French composer Michel Legrand on a musical adaptation of the 1943 play *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, by Jean Giraudoux, but the show's inexperienced producer lost control of the adaptation rights, scuttling the project. "Once I had lost so much hard work, I said, 'To hell with musical theater, I'm going to stick with my poetry, teaching, and translations,'" Wilbur explains. (Today, his translations of Molière, Racine, and Corneille have become standard, and critics have called his renderings of Baudelaire and many other poets the best versions available in English. He knows French, "especially seventeenth-century dramatic language," and can read Dante in Italian; for languages like Russian and Bulgarian, he gets help from scholars and native speakers.)

AFTER A YEAR at the American Academy in Rome and two years teaching at Wellesley, Wilbur joined the Wesleyan College

At age five, Ellen Wilbur asked her parents for a typewriter for Christmas. Pecking at its keys, "I was in heaven," she recalls, "sitting in that same pose I now fall into, trying to put things into words." Decades later, her father, poet Richard Wilbur, offered a paternal perspective on Ellen's fledgling struggles with language and art in his poem "The Writer" (see page 38). "From the first, we knew Ellen had a gift, and told her so," he says. "But I don't think she has learned anything from me—she's a natural writer. She has a perfect sense of narrative structure that I don't have at all; it amazes me."

Editors and fellow authors have concurred. A short-story writer, Ellen Wilbur, a Bunting Institute fellow in 1990-91, has a small, finely wrought body of work published in prestigious venues such as *Ploughshares*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Agni*, and *New Let-*

Filial Fiction

ters. Her fiction has been included in eight anthologies, including two *Pushcart Prize* volumes. In 1984, Stuart Wright's Palaemon Press Limited published *Wind and Birds and Human Voices*. "Skilled, sensitive, and daring in their reach," wrote Eudora Welty of this collection of her short fictions, "they are clearly the work of a born writer."

Early on, Ellen Wilbur tried writing a novel, but soon recognized short fiction as her métier. "The whole excitement of a short story is the tension in it," she explains. "Every word is important. When it works, it's thrilling." (Her father has written only one short story in his career, in the New Mexico desert in 1952. He comments that "the result, shall we say, was rather arid.") The yarns Richard Wilbur invented to tell Ellen and her brothers when they were children helped fuel her affinity for fiction. "He

taught me the joy of imaginary play," she says. "He made the mind and imagining things more fascinating than anything else."

Today, Wilbur supervises the after-school program for beginners and kindergartners at Shady Hill School in Cambridge. She has also edited *The Consolations of God* (Eerdmans, 2003), a collection of sermons by Phillips Brooks, A.B. 1855, S.T.D. '77, who was, for more than 20 years, rector of Trinity Church in Boston, where she worships. ("Even in print, and at the remove of a century, Brooks sounds well," wrote Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church Peter J. Gomes in a foreword, "which is no small thing when few sermons last beyond lunchtime.") Wilbur has even ventured into verse. "If you can believe it, I started out writing poetry," she says. "I had the nerve and the gall and was utterly fearless. Maybe it was because I was a girl—or my father was so good that I didn't worry about comparisons."

faculty in 1957 and stayed for 20 years. To “keep his hand in” as a writer, he requested, and received, every third semester off with pay. He moved to Smith College for 10 more years of teaching before retiring in 1986.

He always preferred subject-matter courses to creative-writing seminars, and consistently spent six or seven hours preparing for each hour of class time. “Looking back on 40 years of teaching, the thing I don’t like about my performance is that I always cared too much about seeming omniscient, and didn’t let the students do as much talking as they should have,” he says. “They learn it when they say it for themselves, and sometimes students sitting around a table discover something quite fresh. It’s satisfying when they find out things that no one had found out before.”

In 1956, *Things of This World* appeared, winning the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award; it contains what is probably Wilbur’s best-known poem, “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.” After this pinnacle of success, years of critical disparagement followed. “Beginning in the 1960s, to write my kind of poetry, to write in meter and often in rhyme, was seen as altogether retrograde and old-hat,” he explains. The introspective “confessional” poetry popularized by Robert Lowell ’39, Litt.D. ’66, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath (Wilbur’s poem “Cottage Street, 1953” describes his singular meeting with the suicidal Plath) took poetry in a direction that contrasted sharply with Wilbur’s more oblique approach to self-expression. “When those distinctions between ‘palefaces’ and ‘redskins’ came around, I was invariably a ‘paleface,’” he says in Jeanne Braham’s 2007 book *The Light within the Light*, which profiles four modern poets, “and when poetry was dubbed either ‘raw’ or ‘cooked,’ mine was definitely ‘cooked.’”

Though he says that every new poem is an experiment, Wilbur is no avant-gardist; he has steeped himself in the history of his art since antiquity, and builds on this heritage. “Wilbur’s collections double as sparkling cyclopedias of forms,” writes associate professor of English Stephen Burt, in a scholarly critique, “not just son-

nets and villanelles but taut quatrains, couplets of all sorts, Provençal ballades, flawless terza rima, comically polysyllabic exact rhyme....” The poet has published only one free-verse (lacking rhyme and regular meter) poem in his life.

Yet Wilbur declares that he has no interest at all in form *per se* (“In the dictionary, *formalist* isn’t far from *formaldehyde*”) or in poetic craft for its own sake. “The kind of poetry I like best, and try to write, uses the whole instrument,” he says. “Meter, rhyme, musical expression—and everything is done for the sake of what’s

being said, not for the sake of prettiness.” At the same time, he believes that “For anyone who knows how to use these forms powerfully, they make for a stronger kind of poetry than free verse can ever be.”

“All these traditional means are ways of being rhythmically clear,” he explains: “making the emphases strong, making it clear what words are important. Rhyme is not just making a jingling noise, but telling what words deserve emphasis. Meter, too, tells what the rhythm of thought is. It doesn’t necessarily sound like music, but it has the strength of sound underlying everything being said. I encourage my students to memorize poems. If a poem is good, it is well to say it again and again in your mind until you’ve found all the intended tones and emphases.” He adds, “One of the great fascinations of poetry is that you’re going almost naked: the equipment is so small, just language.”

Today, Wilbur is one of the few active major poets writing rhymed verse in English; “Rhyming,” he asserts, “will never go away.” Braham quotes him on the subject: “Robert Frost had a wonderful way of putting it. He said, ‘Bad poets rhyme words; good poets rhyme phrases.’ That’s central to my way of composing a poem. I want the rhyme to happen inevitably, as a part of the flow of the argument—not as a way of completing an arbitrary pattern. That latter thing is just ornamentation, doily-making.”

Daniel Aaron observes that his “sense of form and control carries out the tradition of English lyric poetry. Dick’s poems will last; they have finish, humor, detachment, coolness, elegance, precision. There’s always something held back. The (please turn to page 93)

Blackberries for Amelia

Fringing the woods, the stone walls, and the lanes,
Old thickets everywhere have come alive,
Their new leaves reaching out in fans of five
From tangles overarched by this year’s canes.

They have their flowers too, it being June,
And here or there in brambled dark-and-light
Are small, five-petaled blooms of chalky white,
As random-clustered and as loosely strewn

As the far stars, of which we now are told
That ever faster do they blot away,
And that a night may come in which, some say,
We shall have only blackness to behold.

I have no time for any change so great,
But I shall see the August weather spur
Berries to ripen where the flowers were—
Dark berries, savage-sweet and worth the wait—

And there will come the moment to be quick
And save some from the birds, and I shall need
Two pails, old clothes in which to stain and bleed,
And a grandchild to talk with while we pick.

A Measuring Worm

This yellow striped green
Caterpillar, climbing up
The steep window screen,

Constantly (for lack
Of a full set of legs) keeps
Humping up his back.

It’s as if he sent
By a sort of semaphore
Dark omegas meant

To warn of Last Things.
Although he doesn’t know it,
He will soon have wings,

And I, too, don’t know
Toward what undreamt condition
Inch by inch I go.

POETIC PATRIARCH

(continued from page 41)

excess and abandon of postmodern writers exposes them to a lot of messy writing. His verse is never heavy and never bristles with obscurity. Dick was very influenced by Robert Frost; there's always order, discipline, form. He sets up these hazards, as it were; in the end, the structure comes down, and there's the poem."

Vision is the dominant sense in poetry, says Wilbur. "My father was a painter," he notes. "I grew up in a world of painting and always thought in a painterly way." (He has illustrated some of the books he has written for children.) His poems typically germinate with the sight of "some interesting object out in the world—for example, just how a flycatcher flies, its way of moving its wings. Once you've seen this interesting thing, you have to find the words for it, and once you've made it satisfactorily vivid to yourself, you find it has an ideal dimension—it is related to some ideas taking form in the back of your mind." In a 1966 essay, "On

My Own Work," he wrote, "What poetry does with ideas is to redeem them from abstraction and submerge them in sensibility."

"I'm a slow thinker and do almost everything slowly," says Wilbur, "except serve in tennis." He believes that "very few really good poems are written without a lot of thought and a lot of revision—I advise my students to be terribly fussy." In practice, though, he doesn't exactly follow his own counsel. "I don't revise very much," he confesses. "What I do is wait and wait in a state of paralysis for the right thing to come to me. Most writers are not as hopelessly patient as I am. I don't mind sitting in a chair waiting for the right word to come. Most people aren't willing to put in as much chair time as I am. I talked with Dylan Thomas and found that we had very much the same way of proceeding. He worked very, very slowly, though the poem might come out sounding breezy. Each morning, he'd write out what he had done the day before on a fresh sheet of paper, hoping that it would give him the impetus to write a line or two more."

Similarly, "As a translator," Wilbur reports, "I always felt that if I got six or eight lines, that was a good day. I spend so much time on each line trying to get the meaning and tone exact that I don't think my translations will die as soon as some others."

The same could be said of his poetry, which shines with the basic trust in nature and in life that are lodestars for the poet. "Emerson said, 'The deeper we go into ourselves, the more we are everybody,'" he explains. "I think I write poetry on that understanding. If I get deep within myself, I can speak about everybody else. That's my supposition, at any rate."

In some ways, Wilbur is a modern Transcendentalist, who shares with Emerson an attraction to poetry, ideas, religion, performance, and teaching, as well as a Harvard degree. This fall, he returns to Amherst, 66 years after graduating, to teach poetry one day a week. "I'm nervous," he says, "about going back to class again." ▢

Craig A. Lambert '69, Ph.D. '78, is deputy editor of this magazine.

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