

"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.

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.