RICHARD WILBUR'S POETRY: A CELEBRATION OF REALITY

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RICHARD WILBUR'S POETRY: A CELEBRATION OF REALITY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The celebration of reality in Richard Wilbur's poetry has significant implications for contemporary literature and for contemporary man. In literature, his celebration of reality points to the way out of the mood of despair which has influenced much of literary thought in the twentieth century. For the individual, the celebration of reality encourages man to turn from self to an appreciation for reality which makes life worthwhile.

Wilbur correctly describes this time as one of "... bad communications, when any self-transcendence is hard to come by. . . ." 1 Interested mainly in themselves, people fail to communicate with others, and they fail to treat others with respect. Current problems such as the threat of nuclear war and racial discrimination have their roots in the failure to have respect for other persons.

Man's preoccupation with self and his own needs may explain the pessimistic attitude popular in current literature.

If everything does not suit the needs of the selfish person, then he thinks that the world has turned against him. In a similar way of thinking, if man suffers hardships and finally death, then the world must be antagonistic to man or ignorant of his needs. This attitude also affects literary criticism. In his review of Richard Wilbur's book of poetry Things of This World, Hyom Plutzik remarks that "Joy is a rare bird under any circumstances, but in our days, if our poets are to bear witness, it is as elusive as a lunar rainbow."  

Plutzik's review concludes with the comment, "How can he [Wilbur] be so damnably good natured in an abominable world?"  

Such limited views as that of Plutzik make it difficult for one to see the world as anything but bad.

Bertrand Russell recognizes the pessimistic view exemplified by Plutzik's comments as common to many times in history other than the present. He notes that the pessimists believe that they are the only ones who see life as it really is. Further examination of the pessimistic viewpoint leads Russell to conclude:  

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3 Ibid., p. 296.

to conclude that excessive introspection is the root of the trouble.\textsuperscript{5} In his opinion, "Fundamental happiness depends more than anything else upon what may be called a friendly interest in things."\textsuperscript{6} This statement agrees with Wilbur's view that satisfaction in life is found in an appreciation of reality. The problem of boredom is also related to an interest in things outside oneself. "The special kind of boredom from which modern urban populations suffer is intimately bound up with their separation from the life of Earth."\textsuperscript{7} Russell goes on to say that man derives something essential to his well-being from contact with the earth. The cultivation of pleasures which have no relation to the earth, such as gambling, leaves a person "feeling dusty and dissatisfied, hungry for he knows not what."\textsuperscript{8}

Dr. Eric Berne, a psychiatrist, also calls attention to man's need to relate to reality in his book \emph{Games People Play}. The author regards the ability to be sensitive to life outside

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{5}Russell, p. 73.
\item\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., p. 155.
\item\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., p. 67.
\item\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., pp. 65-66.
\end{itemize}
the self as a sign of maturity and individuality. He labels this ability "awareness." He observes that

... most of the members of the human race have lost the capacity to be painters, poets and musicians, and are not left the option of seeing and hearing directly even if they can afford to; they must get it secondhand. The recovery of this ability is called here "awareness."9

This "awareness" becomes particularly important to those who realize that life is short and that living cannot be postponed until a better time.10

These statements by Russell and Berne make an interesting complement to Richard Wilbur's insistence that reality is too important to be ignored. Appreciation is only part of a larger concern which Wilbur discusses, that of relating to reality.

Wilbur uses a rain-dancer as an example of one who successfully apprehends reality. He makes the point that though the rain-dancer may fail in his primary purpose of obtaining rain for crops or another necessary reason, there is something else which prompts him to dance again, even after failing. Wilbur uses a quotation from Susanne Langer to give the answer that "... the most important virtue of

10Ibid., p. 180.
the rite is not so much its practical as its religious
success . . . its power to articulate a relation between man
and nature. . . . " Wilbur's interest in man's relation to
nature arises from his recognition that man's selfishness
has kept man from appreciating much that is valuable in
nature.

While insisting on the importance of relating to nature,
Wilbur recognizes that relating to nature is not easy. The
tempt to relate directly to the rain makes the rain-dancer's
work very difficult. In fact, Wilbur suggests it is impossible
to relate directly to reality. Since reality cannot be under-
stood directly, the artist has no choice but to approach it
indirectly. He does this out of "respect for reality."
Wilbur says that ". . . there is no good art which is not
considered oblique. If you respect the reality of the world,
you know you can only approach it by indirect means." It
is the purpose of artistic form to distinguish the work of
art from that which is real so that there will be no confusion.
The formal aspects of the work indicate to the audience that
"This is not the world, but a pattern imposed upon the world

12 Ibid.
or found in it; this is a partial and provisional attempt to establish relations between things."

Richard Wilbur's philosophy of poetry grows out of his concern for a relationship with reality. In his philosophy reality must always be the poet's first concern because it is from this confrontation with "the reality of things" that poetry derives its strength; otherwise it is likely to be ineffective. With reality as his raw material, the poet proceeds to find some principle which makes the organization of this reality possible. Wilbur's opinion is that "organizing oneself and the world" is a "major" purpose of poetry. He decided to use poetry for organizing the world when it got "out of hand" for him during his experience as an infantryman in World War II in Europe. An occasional confrontation with "the threat of chaos" such as the experience of World War II can add vitality to poetry, in his opinion. Contrary to what some critics believe, Wilbur does not say that "the threat of chaos" should be the primary concern of poetry.


The poem functions as a channel for communicating the poet's view of reality and his organization of the world. Wilbur explains this facet of art's relation to reality by speaking metaphorically about art as a window on the world or as a door between man and the world. The window allows man to see the world, making a "dynamic relation" possible, but a door keeps man from seeing reality as it is.\(^\text{18}\) If one uses poetry as an end in itself while ignoring the reality it could communicate, then the poem has failed in Wilbur's opinion. A "dynamic relation with reality" makes the poem authentic.\(^\text{19}\)

A relationship to reality makes man's life authentic, too, and adds depth to it as Berne and Russell noted. For a person not acquainted with the richness that is in nature and the reality around him, Richard Wilbur's poetry can be quite exciting. His poetry opens new perspectives on ordinary events and objects. Seen through Wilbur's poems, reality becomes meaningful, and the lines of the poem "The Sirens," "I never knew the road /From which the whole world didn't call away," express this new awareness very well. The difficulties of existence, such things as war and social

\(^{18}\text{Wilbur, "Genie in the Bottle," p. 129.}\)
problems, are confronted in Wilbur's poetry, but they never become overwhelming. Although the subject of the dark side of reality does not make up a significant portion of Wilbur's poetry, it is worthwhile to note how he handles it as a part of reality.

Essentially his poetry affirms and celebrates reality in all its diversity. This celebration is the real contribution of his work to current literature, and the consistency of this theme makes its presentation forceful. In the future, Wilbur may be considered the chief poet whose work stands as a tribute to his understanding of men's need for a relation to reality in spite of trends of thought and criticism which opposed his view. His style is praised and generally recognized as excellent, but the content and philosophy of his poems have been neglected. An examination of Wilbur's new approaches to reality, his handling of the dark side of reality, and the overall theme of his work may contribute to a better understanding of that part of his poetry which has not received enough attention. Such a consideration of his theme of celebration as well as a recognition of the stylistic excellence of his work can show that Wilbur's work to this time qualifies him for a place among the significant figures in contemporary American literature, not merely a position as an interesting minor poet.
CHAPTER II

A FRESH LOOK AT REALITY

In the twentieth century, new ways of looking at natural reality pose a problem. The mass media bombard people with so much information that it is almost impossible to absorb it all. Movies, television, clubs, and other forms of entertainment make it easy for one to ignore the reality around him which is not man-made. For those who can look beyond all the distractions, the rewards can be valuable. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset writes that

Everything in the world is strange and marvellous to well-open eyes. This faculty of wonder is the delight...which leads the intellectual man through life in the perpetual ecstasy of the visionary. His special attribute is the wonder of the eyes.¹

Frederic Faverty finds qualities in Wilbur's work such as his ability to make the familiar seem strange which show a depth of perception comparable to the "well-open eyes" Ortega y Gasset mentions.²


²Ibid., p. 70.
A deeper and more meaningful relationship with reality is the alternative Richard Wilbur proposes to those confronted with the choice of living or merely existing in a world of pleasant distractions. Part of this relationship involves looking at reality in new ways and being sensitive to life or renewing this sensitivity. C. E. Southworth states that Wilbur's fresh vision, his ability to see that which is strange in the common, occurs when he removes himself from his surroundings and concentrates his imagination upon objects.  

Admiration for Wilbur's careful observation of life in its many forms comes from a critic who notes that his poems "... are charged with responsiveness to the luster, the tones, of the physical world, and show the poet alert to less apparent matters." F. C. Golffing's comment that Wilbur "... apprehends sharply and justly ..." is another recognition of the poet's perceptive ability.

This ability to look with sensitivity at the world is essential in the vital relationship to reality so important to Wilbur. By concentrating on an object or scene, the poet "... is

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3Southworth, p. 27.


able to transmit to the reader a new reaction about many things. . . . 

A poet's fresh reaction to a part of the world can stimulate the reader's sense of excitement and encourage him to look closely on his surroundings. Often the common things which attract the poet's attention fail to arouse the slightest interest in others. For instance, a hole cut in the floor of a room for repairs would be unattractive to almost anyone, but it is fertile ground for an interesting exploration by the poet. Named for its undistinguished setting, "A Hole in the Floor" is dedicated to René Magritte, a French symbolist painter. As he investigates the hole both above and below the floor, the poet is reminded of Schliemann's excavation of the city of Troy. By looking inside the hole he finds a scene which resembles a street at night:

. . . \ I look in under
Where the joists go into hiding.
A pure street. . . .

with a newsstand on it

The radiator pipe
Rises . . .
Like a shuttered kiosk, standing
Where the only news is night.

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All these suggestions prompted by his survey of the hole and its surroundings cause him to wonder what it is that makes things seem different to him. He decides finally that the power which stimulates his senses is "... the buried strangeness /Which nourishes the known..." This power resides in all things but is seldom recognized. In the poem this "strangeness" makes the floor lamp seem to bloom like a big flower, and it inflames all the rest of the room. When this strangeness is recognized, things take on a new look, as if one were seeing them in an entirely different light.

The "strangeness" hidden in common things comes out clearly in the poem "Stop." The word "stop" is found on road signs and on signs at railroad crossings which read "Stop, Look, and Listen." The observer in the poem is on a train, and the title implies that the reader should look at scenes as closely as the man in the poem does.

The first two stanzas of the poem introduce the tone and the place of action. At first glance, there is little worth noticing. Coming into the station at the end of a winter day, the train scatters bits of paper as it stops noisily.

In grimy winter dusk
We slowed for a concrete platform;
The pillars passed more slowly;
A paper bag leapt up.

The train banged to a standstill.
Brake-steam rose and parted.
Three chipped-at blocks of ice
Sprawled on a baggage-track.
One might think that this scene is not attractive at all.

Paper bags, concrete platform, broken blocks of ice on a

baggage truck—what could be less colorful? But the dull
tone of the first two stanzas changes in the third stanza:

Out in that glum, cold air
The broken ice lay glintless,
But the truck was painted blue
On side, wheels, and tongue,

A purple, glowering blue
Like the phosphorus of Lethe
Or Queen Persephone's gaze
In the numb fields of dark.

The truck's color is the stimulus which changes all the

surroundings which seem so drab. The "purple, glowering
blue" is a color which one might ascribe to the river of

forgetfulness in the underworld (Lethe) or to the eyes of

Persephone, Queen of the underworld. Originally used to

explain natural phenomena, the Greek myths now enrich man's

appreciation of the present world when he relates them to his

own experience. Having read "Stop," one may be pleased by

the way in which the perception of color makes a drab view

interesting.

Similar to "Stop" is "A Glance from the Bridge." Both

poems deal with one view of ordinary scenes, and both poems

progress from the obvious to the unusual aspects of the scenes.

Letting the eye descend from reeking stack
And black facade to where the river goes,
You see the freeze has started in to crack
(As if the city squeezed it in a vice),
And here and there the limbering water shows.
And gulls colonial on the sullied ice.7

The breaking up of dirty river ice late in winter as the spring thaw begins is not particularly beautiful as the poet describes it in these lines. So far the most interesting image is that of the city squeezing the ice as if it were crushing the ice between the river banks. The poem goes on to reveal what the poet finds in this view beyond the actual scene itself.

Some [gulls] rise and braid their glidings, white and spare,
Or sweep the hemmed-in river up and down,
Making a litheness in the barred air,
And through the town the freshening water swirls
As if an ancient where undid her gown
And showed a body almost like a girl's.8

The ice represents the gown, the water represents the body, and the gulls' flight represents the movement made by the laces as the gown is unfastened. This striking group of images may surprise the reader, but it may have been just as surprising to the poet when it occurred to him. With examples like "Stop" and "A Glance from the Bridge" in mind, a person may be urged to look for strange or unusual associations in any event that he sees.

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8Wilbur, Poems, p. 144.
Events can suggest images and associations as the two preceding poems demonstrate. Common symbols can be a rich source of ideas also, even though they go unnoticed ordinarily. The ampersand reminds the poet of a lyre, a clef, a knot, and a vine in one poem.

\&

A slopeshouldered shape from scurrying burdens
Backward and forth, or perhaps a lyre
Or a clef wrung wry in tuning untunable tones,
Or a knot for tugging an out of hand

Vine to the trellis in clerical gardens:
Sweetness & light, ice & fire,
Nature & art have dissocketed all your bones,
Porter, poor pander ampersand.9

The obvious resemblances to objects of the ampersand make one wonder why the similarity never seemed apparent before.

Similar to "\&" is the poem "0".

0

The idle dayseye, the laborious wheel,
The osprey's tours, the pointblank matin sun
Sanctified the first circle; thence for fun
Doctors deduced a shape, which some call real
(So all games spoil), a shape of spare appeal,
Cryptic and clean, and endlessly spinning unspun.
Now I go backward, filling by one and one
Circles with hickory spokes and rich soft shields
Of petalled dayseyes, with harehastening steel
Volleys of daylight, writhing white locks of sun;
And I toss circles skyward to be undone
By actual wings, for wanting this repeal
I should go whirling a thin Euclidean reel,
No hawk or hickory to true my run.10

9Wilbur, Poems, p. 211. 10Ibid., p. 212.
Again one sees the multitude of suggestions and similarities which occur to the imaginative person who concentrates on something as plain as a circle.

The preceding poems may delight the reader and prompt him to remark about the appropriate matching of image and idea. After this initial appeal has passed, what can be said of Wilbur's view of things? If he goes no further than relating the associations which events or symbols generate in his mind, then his work is not different from that of other poets who have done the same thing. He does go beyond the limits of object-idea associations to a fresh way of seeing things which is his own.

"Attention Makes Infinity" is one example of a poem in which Wilbur reverses relationships and enlivens an ordinary scene. The poet tells the reader to look at yards with laundry hung up to dry and at a man stepping off a trolley on a windy day. This view is not unusual, but by talking about laundry as an animate object, he transforms one's attitude toward the scene. While laundry is hardly worth noticing, when the poet says "See, every yard, alive with laundry white," the reader takes notice. "Live" laundry is certainly not ordinary. In keeping with the image of laundry blowing in the wind, there are "billowing wifes and leaves" whose "billowing" makes them part of the action. The pedestrian, "blown" like
the wives and laundry, does not step off the trolley, but rather seems to throw the trolley away—"Tosses a clanging trolley out of sight." Again in the final lines of the poem, the reversal of relationships creates an interesting effect. Ordinarily one walks on sidewalks, but the poet speaks of people supported by the pavement. "Let asphalt bear us up to walk in love, /Electric towers shore the clouds away." In keeping with the sidewalk image, the electric towers seem to act as supports for the clouds near them. In the context of the poem, these last two lines praise the infinite variety of reality and the possibilities of seeing the world in many new and different ways. It is one's careful attention to the world which makes this limitless variety possible--thus the title, "Attention Makes Infinity."

An imaginative view such as that in "Attention Makes Infinity" may take several forms instead of one. The poem "Weather Bird" reveals the tension which may exist between views.11 The object of the poem, a weather vane in the shape of some bird, can be seen either flying or standing still depending on the way one looks at it. Most people, familiar with tricks of the eye, know that simply by looking at an object in different ways, with varying intensity, different

actions seem to take place. By concentrating on the weather vane, as seen against a bank of moving clouds, one may see the object on the vane alternately stand still or move through the clouds, as if they were stationary. This optical illusion the poet has captured very well. He finds it hard to tell whether the bird is "flying stock-still /Or hurdlng, rather.

. . ." Then, in a view which would not occur to most people, the poet also finds a tension in the way he looks at the bird and the house just as he did when he looked at the bird against the clouds. In the new view, the bird is held down by the house which he tries to leave, or in reverse, he holds up the house by his flying. Which view is best? Each has its own merits as the poet explains.

Both would be best. Contention magnifies,
And this discarnate swallow is the crown
Of all that pulls him down,
Since as a schoolboy's kite he tries to rise,
And must be held-to tight
For fear the house will lose its touch with height.

The tension between the two views "magnifies" or expands the relationship of the house and the bird. The weather bird complements the house he stands on, "the crown of it," without which he would have little use. He also serves as a contact with things above the earth, reminding the dwellers that the house and those in it should not "lose . . . touch with height." The opposite extreme of staying too close to
the earth is undesirable, too, since "A house should hug the earth, but turn with it, /Be buoy to circling storms and the moon's manger. . . ." This statement explains the importance of the tension between the bird trying to raise the house and the house holding the bird down to earth. Using this example, the poet makes the point that each environment, sky (symbolic of spiritual things), and earth (symbolic of natural things), has some significance for those who live in the house. The last lines indicate what might happen if the tension were broken:

[The] halcyon bird may hurl to a helix, set
The roof toward anywhere,
And tug the dwellers into empty air.

In this case, the sense of balance is destroyed; the tension which contributed to the well-being of both weather vane and house no longer exists. An inversion of perspective in the line immediately preceding makes an unusual image, "A house should hug the earth, but turn with it, /Be buoy to circling storms, and the moon's manger. . . ." In these lines the image is that of a house floating upside down in "a sea of storm" as a buoy would float on the water. The house is also described as the "moon's manger," its feeding trough, literally. One interpretation of these lines might be that in hard times or in easy times, a house is a good place to be since it provides shelter from storms and is a place for happiness and security. From this study of "Weather Bird" and "Attention
Makes Infinity," one can see that a multitude of observations about the world may occur to the imaginative person who varies his perspective on common scenes.

Other poems which present new views of reality are more explicit in the presentation of their theme. "Praise in Summer" is one example of obviously inverted imagery, beginning with line three:

The hills are heavens full of branching ways Where star-nosed moles fly overhead the dead; I said the trees are mines in air, I said See how the sparrow burrows in the sky!\(^{12}\)

The poet ponders the source of his desire to turn things upside down, wondering if his sensitivity to life is so dull that he can perceive the world only by reversing its natural arrangement. Finally he returns to reality from his images and asks:

. . . To a praiseful eye
Should it not be enough of fresh and strange
That trees grow green, and moles can course in clay,
And sparrows sweep the ceiling of our day?

In spite of the mind's delight in unusual imagery and in seeing life in new ways, reality as it is must be one's first concern.

Wilbur realizes that even perceptive people do not always see things as clearly as they might. This may mean that it

\(^{12}\)Wilbur, Poems, p. 225.
is necessary to shift perspectives occasionally as the poet did in "Praise in Summer." At other times, one can look to external things such as trees which serve to remind him of beauty or awaken his dormant senses to the excitement around him.

Poplar, absolute danseuse,
Wind-wod and faithless to wind, troweling air
Tinily everywhere faster than air can fill,
Here whitely rising, there
Winding, there
Feinting to earth with a greener spill,
Never to be still, whose pure mobility
Can hold up crowding heaven with a tree. 13

The comparison of the poplar tree to a ballet dancer in its "rising," "Winding," and "Feinting to earth" is an apt one. The color imagery portrays quite well the alternate exposure of the green top and white underside of the leaves, and the word "Tinily" effectively captures the sound made by the leaves fluttering in the breeze. The tree seems to hold up heaven in the same way that the electric towers supported the clouds in "Attention Makes Infinity." The poet then turns his attention to the sycamore, equally enchanting in its own way.

Sycamore, trawled by the tilt sun,
Still scrawl your trunk with tatter lights, and keep
The spotted toad upon your patchy bark,
Raffle the sight to sleep,
Be such a deep
Rapids of lacing light and dark,
My eye will never know the dry disease
Of thinking things no more than what he sees.

13 Wilbur, Poems, p. 216.
The attraction of the sycamore is not in its movement, but in the patterns of light and dark it presents by a combination of "the tilt sun" and "patchy bark." The poet hopes that the images the poplar and sycamore convey to him will be a reminder that he is not seeing merely trees, but animate objects which live and serve as testaments to the life which surrounds him even if he ignores it.

Attention to Wilbur's careful observations, such as the ones found in all the preceding poems, can renew one's sensitivity and illuminate natural relationships which would be ignored otherwise. The task of communicating the vitality of nature to a reader is one which Wilbur thinks significant. His work shows that he is concerned about man's appreciation of nature and reality, and the theme of one of his poems, "Juggler," confirms this by stating his belief that poets should heighten appreciation of the living world by using imagery effectively. In the poem, Wilbur first compares the way a ball bounces lower and lower with the way the earth loses its charm in the eyes of people who take it for granted.

A ball will bounce, but less and less. It's not
A light-hearted thing, resents its own resilience.
Falling is what it loves, and the earth fails
So in our hearts from brilliance,
Settles and is forgot.14

14 Willur, Poems, p. 150.
The remedy for this loss of delight in the world is someone who can awaken the senses. "It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls /To shake our gravity up..." This juggler is an extraordinary person who can renew one's sense of delight and wonder in the things of the world. The balls fly through the air and they resemble "a small heaven" in the same way that the planets revolve in their orbits about the sun. The juggler's job is not an easy one, but neither is the poet's task because "...a heaven is easier made of nothing at all /Than the earth regained..." Creating a fictional heaven is easier than bringing people to an awareness of earthly things since natural surroundings are so much a part of everyday life. Having shown that he can work with the balls, the juggler takes a broom, a plate, and a table for his next trick. The act of balancing these objects requires all his skill and constitutes the finale of his show. Making familiar objects seem strange or new is also difficult for the poet. When the juggler manages to set the table, broom, and plate all in motion, the audience is thrilled.

... Damn, what a show we cry:
The boys stamp, and the girls
Shriek and the drum booms...

In the audience's response to the juggler's show, one can see genuine appreciation for the difficulty of the feat. Their loud applause testifies to their excitement. "For him we
batter our hands /Who has won for once over the world's weight." The greatest achievement of the juggler is to overcome the force of gravity in the performance of his tricks.

In a similar sense, a poetic work can be considered great if it can awaken in the individual a sense of newness regarding life and overcome dulled senses. In the sense of achievement, the poet and the juggler have much in common.

After reading these poems which show Wilbur's talent for presenting ordinary things imaginatively, one may feel that the poet does deserve applause for performing a difficult feat comparable to that of a juggler. When the applause dies down, though, one may think, "Such tricks are fine, but can he handle subjects that are serious? What does he have to say about the problems of living in this time?"

The question of tone and content in Wilbur's poetry is the one raised most frequently by critics. G. S. Fraser, an English critic, wonders about the relation of Wilbur's poetry to reality. He notes in the poems

... a certain derivativeness and a certain insubstantiality. Is there a Wilbur "world" (as there is a Hardy world, a Yeats world, a Wallace Stevens world)? Or is there only a Wilbur manner?15

Thomas Cole praises Wilbur's "perfection in the formal aspects" as many critics do, but then he proceeds to question the serious content of the poems, labeling them "prayers on pinheads." The lack of sufficiently serious material in Wilbur's poetry is particularly disconcerting to Ryem Plutzik, who finds it "astonishing" that more of the poet's work does not reflect a tragic view of life. Perhaps one of the harshest criticisms challenging Wilbur's view is that of Theodore Holmes. His charge is not that Wilbur's poetry fails to relate to reality but that the poems are intended to divert our attention away from reality and its problems. James Dickey, a perceptive interpreter of Wilbur's poetry, pinpoints the quality of Wilbur's work which is the ground for much of the adverse criticism.

. . . It's hard to shake off, too, the feeling that the cleverness of phrase and the delicious aptness of Wilbur's poems sometimes mask an unwillingness to think or feel deeply: that the poems tend to lapse toward highly sophisticated play.


17 Plutzik, p. 296.


Instead of taking the poems as they are and evaluating them on their own merits, the critics compare them to a standard which they believe to be best. It may be that they are concentrating on one aspect of literature which makes it difficult for them to see other points of view. William Meredith analyzes this problem of commitment "to certain positions" and comments that it is easy for people to fall into the trap of thinking that disorder and despair are the only appropriate subjects for writers.²⁰

Adverse opinions about Wilbur's poetry deserve consideration. Since the critics seem to be unanimous in their appraisal of what is wrong with the poems, an examination of Wilbur's treatment of serious subjects needs to be made. Otherwise a possible flaw in the poet's work might go unnoticed. In the next chapter, poems which treat problems such as war and social issues will be presented to give a view of Wilbur's work which may refute the critics' charges.

CHAPTER III

FACING REALITY

Looking at reality is difficult when that reality seems threatening. War and other terrible events which affect one's life certainly can keep one from finding anything worthwhile to appreciate. Many times the entertainment mentioned in Chapter One is used as an escape from that part of reality which is harsh. The attempt to escape reality is potentially as harmful as overemphasizing the misfortunes man does suffer. The two extremes are embodied in the outlooks called optimism and pessimism. A moderate view which sees tragedy as part of reality would be more consistent with reality. The distortions of optimism and pessimism are created by human thought and do not necessarily represent reality as it is.

Richard Wilbur notices evil but is not overwhelmed by the fact of it. Louise Bogan notes that "Wilbur has none of that monotonous pessimism which afflicts so many of his contemporaries. . . . [But he] recognizes the terrible shadows in the human situation."1 His ability to affirm life in spite

1Louise Bogan, "Review: Things of This World," New Yorker, XXXII (October 6, 1956), 180.
of the tragedy he sees as part of reality may prove to be his
work of distinction in an age which seems preoccupied with the
tragic part of life.

No stranger to the toughness of life, Wilbur encountered
war as a member of the 36th Infantry Division in Europe during
World War II. According to his statement in Twentieth Century
Authors, the war stimulated him to write poetry seriously for
the first time. "... [It was] not until World War II took
me to Cassino, Anzio and the Siegfried line that I began to
versify in earnest."\(^2\)

Wilbur's earliest poem relating to his experience as a
soldier contrasts the natural features of Italy and Maine in
the poem "Italy: Maine."

In Italy, the hot insolent airs go crowding through
loose poplar heads; the thick pasture grass
where we march
Crushes to juicy mats. In Maine where you
Are walking now in the hard hills, apple and
larch
Make their stand among stones. ... \(^3\)

Most of the poet's attention goes to the features of Maine,
its trees, blueberries, and other plant life. For the poet,
these "luxuries /Have the look of things earned [tested by
time]. ..." The concentration on Maine's characteristics

\(^2\) Kunitz, ed., p. 1080.

\(^3\) Richard Wilbur, "Italy: Maine," Saturday Evening Post,
CCXVII (September 23, 1944), 37.
reveals the author's preference for the country of Maine.

He admits this himself:

Whose song is for swarm and surfeit, let him win
This passive land, moist-green and sun-stunned.
I'll go after
Spike grass, crab apple, gargoyle tamarack
And the last crazy jack pine climbing Cadillac's back.

Wilbur does not say that Italy has no good features. He asserts only that Maine is more attractive to him. He celebrates the beauties of Maine without depreciating Italy.

As much as he may have enjoyed thinking about Maine, Wilbur did not use this as an excuse to ignore his immediate surroundings. In a country at war, even the best scenery is marred by the effects of war's destruction. A snowfall can temporarily hide the scars of war as it does in the poem "First Snow in Alsace." Falling "like moths /Burned on the moon . . . ." the snow hides

What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.4

This event brings joy to the soldiers because it covers the ugliness and death which surround them. It also reminds

4Wilbur, Poems, p. 182.
them of other times and of the pleasant memories of other snowfalls.

The night guard coming from his post,
Ten first snows back in thought, walks slow
And warms him with a boyish boast:

He was the first to see the snow.

To the observer, the snowfall might foreshadow the natural changes which will renew the land after the war is over, in spite of man's destruction. Such an affirmation of nature's renewal of the world is simple and effective.

Man's lack of appreciation for nature in time of war makes it easy for him to use nature as an accomplice in his deadly work. "Mined Country" presents a picture of men checking an apparently harmless area for mines which have been hidden to fool the soldiers.

Danger is sunk in the pastures, the woods are sly,
Ingenuity's covered with flowers!
We thought the woods were wise but never implicated, never involved.  

The corruption of nature is perhaps one of man's worst acts because one can no longer trust his natural surroundings. He must be suspicious of everything. Whatever joy there was in appreciating nature is lost. Wilbur laments this loss of trust in natural things.

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5Wilbur, Poems, p. 178.
Sunshiny field grass, the woods floor, are so mixed up
With earliest trusts, you have to pick back
Far past all you have learned, to go
Disinherit the dumb child,

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.

The poet advocates a thorough investigation of nature, but he does not think that such a close look should ruin the view. His final comment that "the whole world's wild" gives man a guide for appreciating the world as it is—even with its wildness. An understanding of the world's "wildness" can act as a corrective to those who say that the world is too wild to be good.

Man's use and destruction of nature for selfish purposes affects him whether he realizes it or not. As part of the natural world, man shows his true self by the way he uses natural things. When man destroys nature, he shows that he is oblivious to things outside himself and that he has stifled his ability to appreciate life which is not his own. In some cases, man's isolation from nature makes him partially or wholly inhuman. Wilbur looks closely at a man separated from natural influences in the poem "On the Eyes of an SS Officer." He contrasts the SS officer with the discoverer of the South Pole, Roald Amundsen, and with a Hindu priest. Amundsen found adventure in a relation to natural reality,
and the "Bombay saint" found religious inspiration by "staring the sun over the sky" in his meditations. Turning his attention to the SS officer, the poet notes that "... this one's iced or ashen eyes devise, /Foul purities, in flesh their wilderness, /Their fire..." The officer's eyes are like the explorer's eyes ("iced") and those of the saint ("ashen" from staring at the sun too long), but he has no good qualities as they do. The officer sees only impurity and his eyes show this by their "wildness" and their "fire." Finally the poet calls upon God "to damn his eyes" because they are essentially evil and so is the rest of him.

The conflict of war brings out much that is evil in man as the poem on the SS officer shows. Sometimes the humanity that does come out in spite of the war gets less attention than the brutality. The curious mixture of good and evil in man comes out in unusual ways. A sympathetic treatment of a meeting between a soldier and a prostitute in the poem "Place Pigalle" presents two sides of man's nature.6 The soldiers, "boys with ancient faces" which tell of their experiences in war, come to find "their ancient friends, who stroll and loll /Amid the glares and glass..." While the

rest of the town sleeps, the man and woman confront each other. At this moment, the humanity of the soldier appears when he says to her:

"Your muchtouched flesh, incalculable, which wrings
Me so, now shall I gently seize in my
Desperate soldier's hands which kill all things."

The gentleness of the soldier shows that his work of killing has not completely destroyed his humanity.

The destruction of nature and humanity in war is bad, and Wilbur condemns this destruction in the poem "The Giaour and the Pacha." He concentrates his attention on a painting which depicts the struggle between the Giaour (a Turkish name given to non-Moslems) and the Pacha (a Turkish army officer). The painting by the French artist Eugène Delacroix (1799-1863) seems less colorful than the imagery of the poem because there are no brilliant colors, only subdued shades of black, brown, and yellow. In the painting the Pacha is kneeling before the Giaour who is on a horse.

The Pacha sank at last upon his knee
And saw his ancient enemy reared high
In mica dust upon a horse of bronze;
The sun carousing in his either eye.9

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8 Ibid., p. 614.
The terms "mica dust" and "horse of bronze" suggest a brilliance which the painting lacks. As the Giaour is about to kill the Pacha, the sun is suddenly obscured by a cloud which "lifts away /The light of day, of triumph..." This change of light affects the Giaour, and he wonders about his impending act in a moment of apparent suspension of action.

Is this my anger, and is this the end
Of gaudy sword and jewelled harness, joy
In strength and heat and swiftness, that I must
Now bend, and with a slaughtering shot destroy

The counterpoise of all my force and pride?

Finally the Giaour can hesitate no longer; he calls upon the sun to return so that he "may end the chase and know not why."

The Giaour realizes that he is destroying a person like himself in many ways; and his agonized awareness of the brutality of this act reveals his real feelings. The tension evident in the Giaour's choice also makes this poem a strong denunciation of war.

The greater scope and intensity of modern wars increase the threat to man and nature as a whole. Nuclear weapons of unimaginable power present a greater threat to mankind and the world than has ever existed before. In spite of the well-known power of the weapons, man seems unable or unwilling to stop building them. According to Wilbur's poem "Advice to a Prophet," the man who comes in the name of peace...
begging us /in God's name to have self-pity" makes a mistake
by using such an appeal. "Spare us all word of the weapons,
their force and range," the poet says to the prophet, because
man cannot "fear what is too strange" for him to comprehend.
Instead of talking in terms easily ignored, "Speak of the
world's own change . . ." and give a man a tangible idea of
the destruction. The obliteration of trees, animals, and
fish, like those scalded in the river Xanthus by Hephaestus
at the request of Achilles,\(^10\) is something which man can
understand. Then Wilbur poses the question which is central
to the problem:

. . . What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return
These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?

Nature is essential to man's self-understanding and to a
satisfying life. If man fails to appreciate the consequences
of a nuclear war, then he increases the chances of such a
war instead of diminishing the threat.

In addition to the threat of nuclear war, man faces other
problems at this time which are important. Wilbur writes
about some of these problems now just as he wrote about war
after World War II. His interest in nature stands out also
in the poems dealing with political and social problems as
that interest did in the poems on war.

\(^{10}\) Wilbur, "Notes," Poems, p. 58.
"Still, Citizen Sparrow" is perhaps the best example of a poem by Wilbur dealing with a political question. The question is that of the exercise of power by those in office. Using a natural metaphor of the sparrow and the vulture, the poet contrasts the view of the layman (the "sparrow") with the practical accomplishments of the politician (the "vulture"). Despite his "rotten office" and his burden of "carrion ballast," the vulture is a beautiful bird in the poet's opinion. The performance of functions necessary to the well-being of society makes the vulture worthy of the sparrow's forgiveness.

... Pardon him, you
Who dart in the orchard aisles; for it is he [vulture]
Devours death, mocks mutability,
Has heart to make an end, keeps nature new.

At the end of the poem, the author reminds the "sparrow" that Noah's construction of the ark made it possible for life to begin again after the flood. Because "all men are Noah's sons," the politician deserves to be treated with toleration. Even though his work may not meet with the approval of all, it is important to the life of the citizen.

A recent poem by Wilbur offers a sharp contrast to the ideas expressed in "Still, Citizen Sparrow." "A Miltonic Sonnet for Mr. Johnson on the Occasion of His Refusal of Peter Kurd's Official Portrait" appeared in the April 6, 1967,
issue of the *New York Review*. Written in the form of the polemic sonnets by Milton, the poem compares the policies and accomplishments of Lyndon Johnson and Thomas Jefferson.

Heir to the office of a man not dead
Who drew our Declaration up, who planned
Range and Rotunda with his drawing hand
And harbored Palestrina in his head,
Who would have wept to see small nations dread
The imposition of our cattle-brand,
With public truth at home mistold or banned,
And in whose term no army's blood was shed.

After listing the virtues of Thomas Jefferson in a way which puts Lyndon Johnson at a disadvantage, the poet agrees that Johnson's refusal of the portrait was correct because he could not live up to the good qualities in the picture. The final lines of the poem, "Wait, Sir, and see how time will render you, /Who talk of vision but are weak of sight," refer to the portrait of the man which will be made in the future. This poem denouncing a politician seems to be exactly opposite to the praise for the politician's accomplishments in "Still, Citizen Sparrow." Since he is the son of a painter, Wilbur's response may have been directed to Lyndon Johnson's rejection of the painting as well as to his policies.

The lack of taste Wilbur deplores in "A Miltonic Sonnet for Mr. Johnson . . ." is apparent on a much larger scale.
by the way that the public ignores the works of authors, musicians, and artists. Their insensitivity to life makes possible the uniformly dull suburban neighborhoods inhabited by uniformly dull suburban people. The death of a poet means nothing to them. Persons in business who die receive more attention as is evident from these lines in the poem "To an American Poet Just Dead."

Also gone, but a lot less forgotten
Are an eminent cut-rate druggist, a lover of Giving,
A lender, and various brokers. . . . 12

The atmosphere of the "comfy suburbs" in the midst of "soupy summer" with "the sssh of sprays on all the little lawns" conveys the stupor of a sleepy Sunday morning. Since the people in the suburbs fail to recognize the poet's death, the author wonders if mechanical devices like the lawn sprinklers will "weep wide . . . their chaplet tears . . ." for the poet. He proceeds to note that "they won't. In summer sunk and stupified /The suburbs deepen in their sleep of death." Such an indifferent attitude toward life, especially the life of other human beings, is contrary to Wilbur's affirmation of life, and his condemnation of suburban life makes this clear.

An indifferent attitude towards life shows up in the careless use and disposal of things, too. On a drive through

a suburban area, one can see small piles of refuse and broken household articles deposited on the curb for the trash collectors. Taking its name from these worn-out articles, "Junk" reflects the poet's concern for the misuse of objects and the natural resources they represent. In a pile he notices "paper plates," "shattered tumblers," and "a cast-off cabinet" which have been made to be used for a time and then thrown away. Such poor construction reflects a lack of craftsmanship and a lack of respect for the natural substances used to make the things. Using a verse structure like that of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the poet expresses his dissatisfaction with the misuse of natural things for commercial gain.

Haul them off! Hide them!

The heart winces

For junk and gimcrack,

for jerrybuilt things

And the men who make them

for a little money. . . . 13

Despite man's treachery, the substances themselves retain their essential qualities: " . . . the things themselves . . . /Have kept composure. . . . " The poet's final comment is one of hope that the things will decay and then turn into a pure substance again, uncorrupted by man. "They shall waste

13 Wilbur, Poems, p. 9.
in the weather toward what they were."

"... The good

grain [shall] be discovered again."

Indifference to nature represented in works of art and
material goods is a state of mind which indicates a lack of
interest in life. Even worse than these kinds of indifference
is the kind that keeps people from recognizing the real needs
of other human beings. An obvious form of this indifference
to other people is racial discrimination. People are isolated
and their problems are isolated with them. Wilbur attacks
discrimination by talking about the Negro folk hero, John
Henry. At the beginning, the poem "Folk Tune" speaks of
Paul Bunyan, Tom Swift, and Tom Sawyer, all characters in
folk tales or stories about legendary feats. These figures
are no longer popular, nor is the figure of John Henry, but
he takes on new meaning in relation to modern society. Now
he symbolizes the Negro and his problems in addition to the
heroic figure who beat a machine in a race to dig a tunnel.
Listening to hear the city's dreams, the poet finds that
John Henry is in its nightmares. It is he

Whose shoulders roll without an end,
Whose veins pump, pump and burst their seams,

Whose sledge is smashing at the rock
And makes the sickly city toss. . . .

14 Wilbur, Poems, p. 199.
This image symbolizes the labor of the Negro which never ceases against machines or in poor conditions. Every stroke of John Henry's hammer reminds the city of his condition.

John Henry's hammer and his will
Are here and ringing out our wrong,
I hear him driving all night long
To beat the leisured snarling drill.

This picture of man struggling to survive in a harsh environment like our mechanized society makes the progress of our civilization seem small indeed.

Difficulties cut across all lines of society and affect the businessman as well as the common laborer. In a form equally vicious to that of man against machine, competition in business pits man against man. Bertrand Russell talks about this struggle in his chapter on "Competition."

The working life of this man [the businessman] has the psychology of a hundred-yard race, but . . . the race upon which he is engaged is one whose only goal is the grave. . . .15

This realization of the end of his work becomes especially clear to the man who is no longer young. Such a man and his thoughts are described in the poem "In the Smoking Car."

The eyelids meet. He'll catch a little nap.
The grizzled, crew-cut head drops to his chest
It shakes about the briefcase on his lap.
Close voices breathe, "Poor sweet, he did his best."16

15Russell, p. 46.
16Wilbur, Poems, p. 38.
The graying ("grizzled") man who has failed to complete a
business deal successfully dreams of another world of "bird-
hushed glades," "sighing streams," and "native girls."

Could he but think, he might recall to mind
The righteous mutiny or sudden gale
That beached him here; the dear ones left behind. . . .

This dream suggests that he would rather be on a tropic isle
than a commuter train. His dream takes him from the unpleas-
antness of his present situation to the place he desires
where "failure, the longed-for valley, takes him in."

Even for those who do succeed in business, the prospect
of retirement may not seem particularly bright. Growing
old is not unpleasant, but having to do so in virtual isolation
from the rest of society is. People in retirement settle-
ments may find themselves set apart from the rest of society
by their age. The poem "Next Door" describes such a situation.
The arrival of May brings many signs of life and the windows
of the home for the elderly open up after being closed all
winter. Spring's presence is apparent by the way "... the
trees /Break bud and startle into leaf, /Blotting the old
from sight. . . ." The poet finds the way that spring hides
the old people disturbing. He asks:

Must we not see or hear these worn and frail?
They are such hearts, for all we know,
As will not cheat the world of their regard,  
Even as they let it go. 17

Continuing to wonder what life is like for the people, the author imagines their daily activities: sitting and talking of past accomplishments and inventing stories to make up for the part of their lives they cannot remember. At the end of the poem, the poet turns from his thoughts to realize that he does not know what really goes on.

Is it like this? We have no way to know.  
Our lawn is loud with girls and boys.  
The leaves are full and busy with the sun.  
The birds make too much noise.

Nature's new life and the noise it makes overshadow the old, making it easy to ignore them when all else seems to favor youth. The elderly still deserve attention because they participate in life, and the spring may be a time of renewal for them in spite of their age.

Problems such as war, politics, and social issues should be a vital concern for the individual because they are part of reality which he cannot afford to ignore. The poems in this chapter present Wilbur's treatment of these subjects, showing that he does not ignore them. Whether his handling of these subjects is his best work is another matter. Wilbur "... is not at his best in these subjects [matters of public concern]," according to Faverty. 18

17 Wilbur, Poems, p. 54. 18 Faverty, p. 69.
shares his opinion and writes that ". . . public issues have not been particularly fruitful sources of subject matter for Mr. Wilbur." Since only about ten per cent of Wilbur's poems deal with social or political concerns, the comments by Faverty and Stepanchev seem to coincide with the poet's own inclinations regarding subject matter. To say that Wilbur is not primarily interested in social problems is not saying that he disparages or ignores them. The important thing to note is that he does not overemphasize life's difficulties. Because he is not overwhelmed by the sense of despair currently popular, he provides an important corrective to the viewpoint that tragedy is the only legitimate theme in literature today.

Wilbur's main interest is the celebration of reality. He delights in imaginative perspectives like those in Chapter One and in the excitement which he senses in ordinary experiences. An examination of some things he finds particularly enjoyable and the poems which represent his basic theme will be presented next.

19 Stepanchev, p. 94.
CHAPTER IV

THE CELEBRATION OF REALITY

The very title of his book, Things of This World, indicates where Wilbur's interests lie: with the rest of mankind in rediscovering the importance of the things about him.¹

Earlier in this examination of Wilbur's work, imaginative and serious perspectives on reality were presented to give an idea of the scope of the poet's view of reality. Both serious and imaginative outlooks point to a real concern for the importance of the world, as Thames notes in his study of Things of This World. The world's things are Wilbur's subjects and the tone is one of celebration.

Naturally, the range of possibilities for subjects in the world is quite large. Even the poet cannot observe life without being selective. The range of Wilbur's interests is sufficiently large to make it difficult to cover all the subjects in one paper. Therefore, a few poems representing general areas of interest for the poet are dealt with here.

One part of reality which appeals to Wilbur is animal life. There are many poems about all kinds of animals. Birds

¹Thames, p. 119.
get the most attention, with more poems written about them than any other kind of creature. Faverty observes that animals are a primary concern for Wilbur. He also mentions the collection of verse and prose descriptions of thirty-three different animals, A Bestiary, which Wilbur edited. Wilbur's own work, his translations, and excerpts from ancient and modern literature comprise the contents. Ordinary creatures such as the dog, fly, and spider receive attention as do some legendary animals like the mermaid, centaur, and unicorn.

No one poem is representative of all the poems about animals, but "Beasts" gives a broad view of animal life and a good idea of Wilbur's opinion about animals. As the poet looks at animals in their respective habitats, there is peace and harmony.

Beasts in their major freedom
Slumber in peace tonight. The gull on his ledge
Dreams in the guts of himself the moon-plucked waves below.
And the sunfish leans on a stone, slept
By the lyric water,

In which the spotless feet
Of deer make dulcet splashes, and to which
The ripped mouse, safe in the owl's talon, cries Concordance. . . .

The animals enjoy the "major freedom" from thought or responsibility. Bad dreams do not bother them. From this

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2Faverty, p. 60.  
3Wilbur, Poems, p. 95.
tranquil view, the poet turns his attention to a place of "darkness." Here he sees the werewolf, once a man, now corrupted and changed into an unnatural creature, half-man and half-beast. As the transformation of the werewolf is taking place, the poet notices activity "... at high windows /Far from thicket and pad-fall. ..." In high offices in the city's building's, far from the peace of nature, "suitors of excellence" are at work. In their pursuit of "excellence," the men "turn from their work to construe again the painful /Beauty of heaven. ..." It is as if the moon which changes the man into the werewolf affects them too. Their distance from nature is not a sign of superiority as the results of their work show. They are busy

Making such dreams for men
As told will break their hearts as always, bringing
Monsters into the city, crows on the public statues,
Navies fed to the fish in the dark
Unbridled waters.

Their plans lead to catastrophe, the dulling of man's sensitivity, and the death of men in the "navies fed to the fish.

..." When contrasted to the "suitors of excellence," the animals seem tame. One may wonder if it is not man who is the "beast."

Plants can also be attractive as the explication of "Popular, Sycamore" in Chapter I shows. In that poem the sights and sounds of the trees stimulated the poet's imagination.
Natural things may speak to the poet in ways other than that of flashy imagery. The quiet strength of pieces of driftwood which have survived the pounding of water may be inspiring as it is in the poem "Driftwood." As he looks at the pieces of wood, the poet tries to imagine what kind of experiences the wood has endured. "In greenwoods once these relics must have known /A rapt, gradual growing. . . ." The events which brought the wood to the beach are lost in time, but the obscurity of the past does not prevent the poet from wondering what might have happened to them.

Say, for the seven cities or a war
Their solitude was taken,
They into masts shaven, or milled into
Oar and plank:

Afterward sailing long and to lost ends,

Well they availed their vessels till they
Smashed or sank.4

Next the poet imagines the wood floating on the waters and being formed by the waves until the tides brought them to the shore. There is beauty worth celebrating in these objects, according to the poet. To him they look like "Curious crowns and scepters" which have "the beauty of /Excellence earned."
The "excellence" the poet speaks of becomes clear in the next two stanzas. The wood which has "ridden to homeless

wreck" and has "revolved /In the lathe of all the seas " is evidence that everything does not succumb to the forces acting upon it and lose its essential qualities. The driftwood has preserved its essential nature, its "dense /Ingenerate grain," even though it has been pounded and warped by water. One can see a parallel between the praise of consistency in "Driftwood" and the poem "Junk" which also praises the quality of things which resists change (" . . . the things in themselves / . . . Have kept composure. . . . "). This constancy in nature can be both an example to man of the virtues of remaining true to oneself and an assurance of the continuing life cycle.

Natural things are attractive, but there are other things in the world, as the poet recognizes. Such is the case with fountains which stream or rise and splash in a setting of some sort. Wilbur writes of the features of "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra." This is one of Wilbur's "best poems" according to Donald Hall. Hall sums up the poem's content in this way:

... Wilbur compares the ornate fountain of the title with the more classical plainness of a jet before St. Peter's [Cathedral], and decides in favor of the humane and intricate over the austere.5

5Donald Hall, "Claims on the Poet," Poetry, LXXXIII (September, 1956), 402.
Each fountain has striking features which the poet describes carefully. The baroque fountain receives more attention because it has more detail to it than does the fountain at St. Peter's. The poem opens with a description of the baroque fountain.

Under the bronze crown
Too big for the head of the stone cherub whose feet
A serpent has begun to eat,
Sweet water brims a cockle and braids down

Past spattered mosses, breaks
On the tipped edge of a second shell, and fills
The massive third below. . . .

In addition to the cherub, serpent, and sea shells, ("cockle"), there is a figure of Pan ("The stocky god [with]. . . shaggy knees"), his "faunness," and several of Pan's children ("a faun-menage and their familiar goose"). The water splashes down from shell to shell until it lands in

. . . the trefoil pool, where ripple-shadows come
And go in swift reticulum
More addling to the eye than wine. . . .

The net-like patterns ("reticulum") in the pool shaped like a clover leaf dazzle the eyes of the observer. Figures and patterns of water are the primary attractions of the baroque fountain. The column of water is the center of attention in the fountain at St. Peter's. Climbing upward, the water

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6 Wilbur, Poems, p. 103.
seems to symbolize man's struggle to reach for something beyond himself.

. . . --the main jet
Struggling aloft until it seems at rest

In the act of rising, until
The very wish of water is reversed,
That heaviness borne up to burst
In a clear, high, cavorting head, to fill

With blaze and then in gauze
Delay, in a gnatlike shimmering, in a fine
Illumined version of itself, decline,
And patter on the stones its own applause. . . .

Wilbur then poses a question about man's life relating to the two fountains. Should man live simply and strive for things beyond self, as represented by the fountain at St. Peter's and reject the sensual pleasures of life portrayed in the baroque fountain? He answers that perhaps St. Francis "... might have seen in this /No trifle, but a shade of bliss—. . . ." Therefore, man should not disregard the sensual pleasures of life. Faverty regards Wilbur's favorable response to the baroque fountain as evidence of his "affirmation." 7 Louise Bogan also found qualities in the poem worthy of compliment. "... 'A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra' . . . is more than a technical triumph, it is a poem of tender humor unexpectedly linked with penetrating vision." 8 One should be sensitive to the ornate as

7 Faverty, p. 69. 8 Bogan, p. 180.
well as the simple, for both have qualities which are worthy of appreciation.

Fountains and fire trucks, different as they are, are both part of the reality which Wilbur celebrates. In the poem "A Fire-Truck," there is the "remarkable impression of a fire truck racing along a street..." which gives the reader a good example of the poet's ability to make "a vivid report" of the world's excitement. The poem begins with the fire truck bursting in upon the senses of the observer.

Right down the shocked street with a siren-blast
That sends all else skittering to the curb,
Redness, brass, ladders and hats hurl past,
  Blurring to sheer verb. . .

The line "Blurring to sheer verb" captures the flow of movement and emphasizes the action. Some of the details which give the reader a sense of immediacy are found in the line "Redness, brass, ladders and hats hurl past..." At first the poet seems annoyed that the fire truck has interrupted his thoughts. His criticism is mixed with praise, though, noting that the fire truck is "Beautiful" as well as a "heavy, unwearied, loud, obvious thing!" The note at the end of the poem is one of appreciation. The poet speaks of his admiration

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9 Stepanchev, p. 105.

10 Wilbur, Poems, p. 35.
for the truck's "phoenix-red simplicity, enshrined /In that not extinguished fire."

When one responds to an event such as the passing of a fire truck, the whole experience is immediate and not easily analyzed. The poet, however, has managed to catch not only the sights and sounds which people have during such an experience, but also the feelings of the moment which elude the ordinary observer. In so doing, he makes a common event memorable and urges one to be more sensitive to ordinary things so that life will be richer.

By making ordinary experiences exciting and finding reality's attractive qualities in such poems as "A Fire-Truck" and "Driftwood," the poet reinforces his argument that "the reality of things" must be the poet's first concern. Another way to argue for the importance of things is to present the alternatives for the person who fails to recognize or appreciate reality. The obvious opposite of reality is the unreal or unnatural. As an example of an unnatural thing, Wilbur chose the vampire. According to the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, the vampire is "One of the types of the undead; a living corpse

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or soulless body that comes from its burial place and drinks the blood of the living."\(^{12}\)

The Undead

Even as children they were late sleepers,
Preferring their dreams, even when quick with monsters,
To the world with all its breakable toys,
Its compacts with the dying;

From the stretched arms of withered trees
They turned, fearing contagion of the mortal,
And even under the plums of summer
Drifted like winter moons.\(^{13}\)

The vampires in this poem occupy a peculiar place in the world. They are not dead, but neither are they alive since their existence is dictated by a drive to feed on the life-blood of living things. They are "Secret, unfriendly, pale, possessed /Of the one wish, the thirst for mere survival.

. . ." Their thirst for blood, a symbol of life, indicates that they are not alive in the sense that ordinary animals are. To be suspended between the poles of life and death while hungering for life is a desperate situation. After avoiding contact with life while they lived ("fearing contagion of the mortal"), these creatures are now damned to search endlessly for the living substances which they once despised. In contrast to the reality of physical death represented by "a thrush cold in the leaves" and "an old scholar resting

\(^{12}\) Wilbur, "Notes," Poems, p. 58. \(^{13}\) Wilbur, Poems, p. 22.
his eyes at last," the vampire's existence has little value even though he has managed to escape death. What is significant about the vampires is their inability to find what they seek—"To prey on life forever and not possess it. . . ." The vampire's search for blood compares quite well to the way rock crevices catch water but never absorb it: "As rock-hollows, tide after tide, /Glassily strand the sea." One is reminded of the mythological figure of Tantalus, who deceived the gods and was punished by being surrounded by food and water which he could only hunger for and never reach. The poet speaks to the reader when he says "Think how sad it must be . . . /To prey on life forever and not possess it. . . ." In the context of the poem, he is asking the reader if he is truly alive or not. Those who do search for life without finding it, the living "vampires," are already dead in a sense. Thus the poet challenges the individual to establish a relationship to reality by showing what life apart from reality can be like.

The fate of the vampire or anyone who cannot find the life which he desperately seeks is terrible. Equally terrifying in another way would be life in a vacuum, apart from all objects and sensations. By showing the emptiness of a life without things or objects, the poet impresses the importance of recognizing the existence of things upon the reader.
Stepanchev finds the poem which confronts the question of a world of emptiness, "A World Without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness," as "... the best expression of Wilbur's love of actuality, with all its contrasts. ..."\(^{14}\) The opening of the poem pictures camels moving out of the abundance of life in the oasis into the barrenness of the desert. The object of the journey is "Traherne's sensible emptiness"\(^{15}\) which is accessible to the mind only, for there is nothing for the senses to perceive.

The tall camels of the spirit
Steer for their deserts, passing the last groves loud
With the sawmill shrill of the locust, to the whole honey of the arid
Sun. They are slow, proud,

And move with a stilted stride
To the land of sheer horizon, hunting Traherne's
Sensible emptiness, there where the brain's lantern-slide
Revels in vast returns.\(^{16}\)

To that part of his soul which longs "to drink /Of pure mirage," the poet gives this warning:

... those prosperous islands are accurst
That shimmer on the brink

Of absence; auras, lustres,
And all shinings need to be shaped and borne.

\(^{14}\)Stepanchev, p. 97.

\(^{15}\)Thomas Traherne, English poet, 1637-1674.

\(^{16}\)Wilbur, Poems, p. 117.
Although the islands of "pure mirage" seem outwardly attractive, they are evil because they offer no contact with the world. As an example of the mistakes that arise from failing to take notice of the world, the author reminds the soul of the grotesque paintings that resulted when early painters tried to put halos on men to indicate that they were saints.

Think of those painted saints capped by the early masters
With bright, jauntily-worn
Aureate plates, or even
Merry-go-round rings.

This attempt to make a person seem holy by use of "Merry-go-round rings" is rightly criticized as ridiculous. The mistake of too much emphasis on spiritual things causes the poet to tell his soul to turn from the desert's emptiness.

Back to the trees arrayed
In bursts of glare, to the halo-dialing run
Of the country creeks, and the hill's bracken tiaras made
Gold in the sunken sun.

These things make up the world of objects illuminated by light which should be "the spirit's right /Oasis, light incarnate." The spirit's true place is with the world of things, not the world of abstractions and emptiness.

After this consideration of the poems which indicate the deficiencies of a life lived apart from reality, one might find a positive exposition of the author's love of reality desirable. Both "The Undead" and "A World Without Objects
"tell of the emptiness in searching for life without seeking to relate to reality. What is it that causes the poet to affirm reality while recognizing its flaws? The thing which makes this possible for Richard Wilbur is love. As he says,

Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian; Augustine says it is love that brings us back.17

Wilbur uses the idea expressed in the quotation by St. Augustine as the basis for his poem "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World."

In this poem, the soul is no longer in search of a "sensible emptiness," but wakens "astounded" to find that "the morning air is all awash with angels."

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
as false dawn.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.18

The "angels" wear "bed-sheets," "blouses," "smocks," and other laundered clothing hung out to dry. The movement of air through the clothes seems to suggest an unseen presence like that of "angels."

18 Wilbur, Poems, p. 53.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Now they are flying in place . . .
... and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

In the midst of the soul's enjoyment of the movement of the clothing, the coming day and its demands are realized by the soul. Instead of being subject to daily life which tarnishes the morning's perfection, the soul wishes that the world were as pure as the laundered clothing.

... Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.

Finally, in acceptance of its place in the world, "The soul descends once more in bitter love /To accept the waking body. . . ." In the same spirit of acceptance, the soul now consents to the use of laundry to clothe men and women and to become soiled as they engage in the activities of life.

Robert Horan observes that "The insight is humble and assertive. Love calls us, out of ourselves, from our deserts of tedium and impasse, . . . toward various realities, the things of this world."^19 This poem calls us to the world in

two ways. First is its celebration of the beauty hidden in ordinary things, their spiritual qualities. Richard Eberhart finds it important that Wilbur's poem

... celebrates the immanence of spirit in spite of the "punctual raps of every blessed day." The conflict is between a soul-state and an earth-state. The soul wins. The soul, felt as a vision of angelic laundry on awakening, must still be incorporated into the necessities of everyday reality. Man is redeemed by the angelic vision.20

The second quality which calls us to the things of the world is the effective imagery. One critic praises Wilbur's "... handling of imagery drawn from ... laundry ... which he subjects to the most amazing and spiritualizing transformations."21 The theme of acceptance of life and the image of angels in laundry show a real sense of affirmation of life and reality by the poet. Other poems examined in this paper celebrate reality in various ways, but "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" supplies the key which makes the celebration possible: love.

The range of subjects, from animals to laundry, mentioned in this survey of Wilbur's work gives one an idea of the number

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21 John Logan, "To the Silly Eye," Commonweal, LXIV (August 10, 1956), 47.
of things in the world which Wilbur writes about. When one can embrace all of reality with a feeling of love, the result may well be an impulse to celebrate. The poet's response to his appreciation for the world is that of celebration, and many critics find this theme throughout his work. Instead of listing several quotations which say essentially the same thing, one critic's remarks may be sufficient. James Dickey's interpretation of Wilbur's main theme is that "there is, underlying the grace and negligent mastery, the thing that should eventually make him the truly important poet he deserves to be . . . [his] quietly joyful sense of celebration and praise. . . ."22 The theme of celebration has also been recognized by Hall, Rosenthal, Stepanchev, Faverty, and Mills in various articles. Mills goes further than Dickey and defines Wilbur's concern for reality as a "reverential attitude towards life."23 Originally a concept in the philosophy of Dr. Albert Schweitzer the term, "reverence for life" seems appropriate as a description of Wilbur's attitude as seen in his poems. Whether his feelings are actually love, reverence, or a mixture of both emotions, they are genuine and deserve respectful consideration. Such a consideration of his work

22 Dickey, p. 490.

can lead one to a new appreciation for all aspects of reality and a celebration of life.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Richard Wilbur's celebration of reality is implicit in some of his poems, while it bursts forth in others. His concern is especially apparent in the poems which reveal new insights into ordinary occurrences. This same concern makes it possible for the poet to write about the deficiencies of the world without being overcome by a sense of hopelessness about the evil in the world. Sheer enjoyment of the things and creatures of reality is the most satisfying of the poet's responses to life, and celebration of this relationship with reality is his most important theme. This theme is truly his own because he writes consistently about celebration, unlike other poets who do so only occasionally.

The celebration of reality grows out of his sensitivity to the world around him and the hidden beauties which that sensitivity reveals to him. Without recognizing the qualities of things in the world, life for the individual becomes something like the existence of the vampire: a frantic longing for life without being able to find it.
Richard Wilbur's noteworthy position in American letters lends support to his views on reality. His activities as translator, lecturer, teacher, and poet as well as the many awards he has won for his work indicate that he has not let his talent or energy stand idle. In view of his accomplishments in literature, it is disappointing that he is passed over by some critics who fail to recognize the value of his work simply because they have taken little trouble to understand his poetry apart from prevailing modes of thought. Those who have read his work carefully agree on the common feature which distinguishes it from much of literature today: its theme of celebration. Not to be discounted are his stylistic achievements which are applauded even by those who find fault with the content of the poems.

Some time may pass before the value of the celebration of reality for modern man is realized. Those who believe that reality has few good aspects may find themselves cheated when they realize that their idea of reality was only an idea and not consistent with things as they are.

Wilbur does not advocate a system of thought which reveals the nature of reality. He champions the appreciation of things as they are while recognizing that evils exist and should be corrected. The simplicity of such a view of life may be offensive to persons who equate acceptance of life
with naiveté or ignorance. Neither naïve nor ignorant, Wilbur finds strength and joy in his relationship to nature and the rest of reality. This joy and its celebration he offers to anyone who will read his poems. It is this celebration which makes his work significant to all who realize that life is precious.
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