RICHARD WILBUR AND THE POETRY
OF APOCALYPTIC INTERSTICES

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Randall D. Compton, B.A., M.A.
Denton, Texas
August, 1994
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I have titled my dissertation Richard Wilbur and the Poetry of Apocalyptic Interstices, fully aware of the possible danger of using the term "apocalyptic." I use the term "apocalypse" and "apocalyptic" not to connect my topic to the prophetic apocalyptic tradition, but rather because I find the etymology of "apocalypse" helpful in describing the function of the interstices in Wilbur’s poetry: the present day usage of "apocalypse," meaning a disclosure or revelation of some sort comes from the Greek verb "apokaluptein" and means literally "to uncover." The basic idea behind my dissertation is that much of Wilbur’s poetry takes two or more opposites or poles and uncovers or "discovers" a hidden perspective or truth that is available only through bringing the opposites together and examining the interstice between them.

Critics have frequently commented on Wilbur’s technique of looking at opposites or poles (most often spirit and matter), focusing on his desire to see the physical world infused with the world of spirit. Those critics who have casually dismissed his task of incarnation as well as those who find merit in it have most often claimed that Wilbur
desires to somehow find or create a balance between physical and spiritual reality, to affirm each world without losing or overemphasizing the other. This popular approach to Wilbur’s poetry is dangerously attractive because the poet himself generally supports it; yet this view is limiting because it says little about the important framework of apocalyptic interstices on which much of Wilbur’s poetry relies. In my dissertation I assert that Wilbur’s poetry is not so much an attempt to balance spiritual and physical realities as an attempt to mine the richness that exists in the boundary between the two worlds. I also examine and comment on his poetry that exists in the space created by other apocalyptic interstices as well.
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INTRODUCTION

I have titled my dissertation Richard Wilbur and the Poetry of Apocalyptic Interstices, fully aware of the possible danger of using the term "apocalyptic." I use the term "apocalypse" and "apocalyptic" not to connect my topic to the prophetic apocalyptic tradition, but rather because I find the etymology of "apocalypse" helpful in describing the function of the interstices in Wilbur's poetry: the present day usage of "apocalypse," meaning a disclosure or revelation of some sort comes from the Greek verb "apokaluptein" and means literally "to uncover." The basic idea behind my dissertation is that much of Wilbur's poetry takes two or more opposites or poles and uncovers or "discovers" a hidden perspective or truth that is available only through bringing the opposites together and examining the interstice between them.

Critics have frequently commented on Wilbur's technique of looking at opposites or poles (most often spirit and matter), focusing on his desire to see the physical world infused with the world of spirit. Those critics who have casually dismissed his task of incarnation as well as those who find merit in it have most often claimed that Wilbur desires to somehow find or create a balance between physical and spiritual reality, to affirm each world without losing
or overemphasizing the other. This popular approach to Wilbur's poetry is dangerously attractive because the poet himself generally supports it; yet this view is limiting because it says little about the important framework of apocalyptic interstices on which much of Wilbur's poetry relies. In my dissertation I assert that Wilbur's poetry is not so much an attempt to balance spiritual and physical realities as an attempt to mine the richness that exists in the boundary between the two worlds. I also examine and comment on his poetry that exists in the space created by other apocalyptic interstices as well.

Much of the apocalypse in Wilbur's poetry is achieved in transformational moments--space or time that exists between states of being. My reading of Wilbur's poetry assumes three frequent sources of the transformations he uses: physical perception, acts of nature or of God, and acts of mental or spiritual faith. Wilbur's poetry explores these transformations and draws much of its language and thought from the area between the poles of these transformations. Some of the poles between which interstices lie and transformations occur are sight/blindness, light/dark, stillness/activity, dreaming/waking, falling/rising. These poles can exist either statically or dynamically. If they exist statically, they provide a stable environment where clear distinctions melt into each other in a narrow but rich boundary zone;
when the poles are dynamic or are becoming their opposites, they provide a transformational moment where distinctions are in flux. This transformational period is also a sort of boundary zone in time when objects are not themselves but are also not the objects they will become. Dynamic transformational moments are also paradoxical in that creation and revelation come from destruction and loss of clear distinction.

A relatively small amount of Wilbur criticism exists presently. Although about fifty article-length studies have been done over the last four decades, Donald Hill's *Richard Wilbur* (1967) and Bruce Michelson's *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (1991) are the only book-length studies done on Wilbur's poetry thus far. Both provide in-depth examinations of many of Wilbur's poems, but neither touches on the subject of interstices. Wendy Salinger's *Richard Wilbur's Creation* compiles many of the most interesting reviews and critical essays on Wilbur's work published through the late 1970's. I also quote from an interview that I conducted with Mr. Wilbur while he was visiting the campus of Angelo State University in the spring of 1990.

In the first chapter I explain the concepts of apocalyptic interstices and transformational moments in Wilbur's work, contrasting my ideas with those of Wilbur scholars. Critics of Wilbur's poetry have seen his work as a balance between various ideas, and I am interested in

In the second chapter I examine the role of the physical senses in Wilbur's poetry, particularly eyesight and hearing. These two senses dominate Wilbur's poetry; examining his use of them is crucial to understanding how he uses interstices. For example, the first section of The Mind-Reader (1976) is entitled "The Eye." The poem "The Eye" in this section is central to understanding Wilbur's use of the senses because it not only expresses the notion of a tenuous interstice between object and receptor, but also the interstice between spiritual and physical perception.

In Chapter Three I focus on the interconnectedness of death and life in Wilbur's poetry. In the majority of his poems that deal with death Wilbur explores the boundary created when death contains life or life contains death. A technique that Wilbur employs in the area of death/life is that of juxtaposing memory with present perceptions, paradoxically suggesting life which is in time yet timeless. In "For W.H. Auden," "The Dream," "Cottage Street, 1953," and many others Wilbur looks back and forth along time to evoke time/timeless boundary.

I examine in Chapter Four Wilbur's use of interstices
in the physical world. Much has been said by critics about Wilbur's treatment of nature, and I contrast my ideas of interstices in nature with common critical views by suggesting that many of Wilbur's nature poems, instead of merely combining or balancing the physical and the spiritual worlds, exist in interstices between these two poles. Wilbur uses the boundary between the spiritual and physical worlds and also explores common opposites in nature to evoke the dominant dual images in his poetry such as beauty/ugliness and chaos/order. Poems such as "Children of Darkness," "Still, Citizen Sparrow," "Junk," and many others demonstrate Wilbur's mapping of the zone between extremes of physical ugliness and beauty, as well as the boundary between chaos and order.

In the fifth chapter I discuss the interstitial organizing principle behind Wilbur's poetry. Because in much of his poetry Wilbur insists on the independent existence of the self and the world exterior to the self, many critics overlook the poems that call this belief into question. I suggest that Wilbur not only uses the principle of apocalyptic interstices within individual poems, but also between poems. Wilbur achieves the interstices between poems by having poems about faith in the self and its perceptions as one pole and juxtaposing them with poems that call into question individual perceptions. This interstice leads to the paradoxical revelation that faith and doubt are
reliant on one another and indeed may be different expressions of the same power.
CHAPTER I

"A SECOND FINDING"

One of the most common starting places in critical examinations of Wilbur’s poetry is his insistence that the realms of spirit and matter actually exist apart from the perceptions of the individual. I, too, will begin with this basic presupposition about Wilbur’s poetry but diverge from other critics at the point where they commonly claim that Wilbur’s poetry is an attempt to find a balance between the physical and spiritual worlds. Instead, I would like to examine the basic framework upon which I believe much of Wilbur’s poetry is based: apocalyptic interstice.

As mentioned in the introduction, I use the term "apocalyptic" to describe the interstices in Wilbur’s poetry because of its relation to the idea of "uncovering." I believe that Wilbur’s mastery at uncovering commonly unrealized aspects of situations, objects, and humanity stems from his basic technique of setting up opposite poles, bringing them together, and creating a space where something different from but reliant upon the poles exists. These spaces or interstices that Wilbur creates causes his subject matter to resonate between these poles, suggesting multiple possibilities for language and granting to much of his
poetry a shimmering, "now-you-see-it, now-you-don't" quality. Some of the poles between which interstices lie and transformations occur are sight/blindness, light/dark, stillness/activity, chaos/order, as well as many others. I will look at several of Wilbur's poems ("The Beautiful Changes," "Water Walker," "Marginalia," "A Hole in the Floor," as well as others) and suggest that Wilbur's poetry does not merely attempt to balance the spiritual and physical worlds (and other apparent opposites) but rather mines the vast realm that lies in the interstices between them.

To provide a contrast to what I am calling apocalyptic interstice, I want to briefly examine some typical examples of the criticism claiming that Wilbur's poetry is primarily concerned with balance. Paul Cummins suggests that we should think of Wilbur's poetry in terms of "a thesis and antithesis, often leading to a synthesis ... presented as a reconciliation of life's opposites" (12). He further claims that many of Wilbur's poems offer seemingly irreconcilable opposites which must be acknowledged and accepted in order to achieve a measure of reconciliation: "it is only by recognizing these opposites that man can avoid falling victim to one extreme or another; only by this recognition can the 'dynamic balance' be reached" (12). Another critic claims that Wilbur's poems balance contradictory impulses and emotions; they are contexts in
which emotion is not merely expressed but related and realized" (Jones 308). James Breslin states that Wilbur’s "carefully defended and well-balanced position concedes the limitations of personal imagination and the authority of traditional forms" (Breslin 35). While I tend to agree that moments of balance occur in Wilbur’s poetry, I think critics fall short when they imply that balance is somehow the ultimate goal in Wilbur’s poetry. Wilbur is not primarily interested in bringing together opposites just so he can achieve some sort of "dynamic balance"; rather he exploits the various interstices which exist between the opposites that he pushes together in order to propel the moments of apocalypse that commonly run through his poetry.

One of Wilbur’s earliest poems "The Beautiful Changes" (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems 1947) provides a good starting point to understanding how Wilbur exploits interstices and transformational moments—those instants when distinctions between poles are in flux, not themselves nor yet the things they will become. Containing transformations in both the physical world and the speaker’s perceptions of that physical world, "The Beautiful Changes" offers examples of some of the apocalyptic interstices that operate throughout much of Wilbur’s collected work. The title "The Beautiful Changes" itself contains the shimmering quality indicative of the power of Wilbur’s use of interstices and transformational moments: the words
"beautiful" and "changes" provide a troubling moment for the reader trying to determine what parts of speech they play. In this way, Wilbur molds form with content in the poem since the poem itself is concerned with finding an interstice between two different perceptions in order to more clearly envision a relationship with another person.

The poem begins by describing specific beautiful changes, initially evoking a noun reading of the title word "changes" and an adjective reading of "beautiful" in the title:

One wading a fall meadow finds on all sides
The Queen Anne's lace lying like lilies
On water; it glides
So from the walker, it turns
Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you

Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes. (ll. 1-6)

The first transformation that occurs is from dry ground to water; momentarily, the speaker's perceptions are imaginatively altered. Between the two poles (lilies and lace) a brief interstice is born within the speaker's imagination in which the objects perceived are not themselves but are not each other. Wilbur achieves this moment of interstice by using the word "like," demonstrating that while the speaker is not fooled into mistakenly
identifying the lace as physically changing to lilies, the two temporarily become imaginatively one. The meaning of the word "lying" adds to the moment because it vibrates, alternatively suggesting reclining and deceiving. This doubling evokes the sense that as the lace lies across the field it "lies" to the senses by suggesting lilies. The lace is thus transformed into lilies by a type of fabrication (in the dual sense of lying and building) of physical perception.

Also underlying this moment of transformation is the change from sterility to growth: imaginatively combining earth and water leads to the discovery of another transforming relationship between the speaker and the person addressed in the poem. The transformation provides the elements of life. As the dry grass is transformed into a lake, so the person addressed transforms the speaker's mind into valleys of "Lucernes," a type of alfalfa used as rich fodder. The transformation thus metaphorically offers a wider, richer range for imagination in the rest of the poem.

In the second stanza, the speaker moves from the particular person addressed in the first and last stanza of the poem and comments generally on the types of transformations that "the beautiful" evokes. These transformations deceive the perceptions of the speaker, thus providing deeper knowledge in which creativity can operate:

The beautiful changes as a forest is changed
By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;
As a mantis, arranged
On a green leaf, grows
Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves
Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows. (11. 7-12)

This stanza adds to the typical perception of a chameleon changing its skin hues, suggesting that the reptile's color changes alter the forest in which it lives. The transformation in this stanza is dynamic because it is endless: if the forest is changed in response to the chameleon's changes and the chameleon continues to tune to the forest's changes, a never-ending transformation begins to occur. Thus, the chameleon and forest provide poles of transformation between which the speaker perceives a deeper significance: the ultimate idea of greenness revealed in this apocalyptic interstice between the insect and foliage.

The mantis and the leaf into which it grows for camouflage provide the same sort of poles for the speaker's perceptions. Ironically, both the mantis and the chameleon transform themselves to capture prey; yet the deceptive, destructive force of the reptile and the insect provide life for the poet's imagination by demonstrating that levels of perception are endless; "green is deeper than anyone knows," revealing that the deceptively simple green color we often
perceive is sometimes not provided by those objects (like trees) to which we commonly attribute it.

In the last stanza, Wilbur returns to the person he addresses in stanza one by commenting on her transforming qualities. In contrast to the transformation wrought by the primitive instinct of the mantis and reptile in the second stanza, the transformation she evokes does not fool in order to capture prey, but rather to divide things from their identities:

Your hands hold roses always in a way that says
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes
In such kind ways,
Wishing ever to sunder
Things from thing's selves for a second finding,
to lose
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

(11. 13-18)

This stanza clearly illustrates the idea of apocalyptic interstice: the roses exist in a state of possession and gift. From the dynamic transformation of lace and lilies, lizards and insects Wilbur moves the poem to a moment of still beauty. The hands of the beloved in the poem "always" hold roses in such a way that says they belong to both the lover and the beloved; out from the interstice between these two poles the speaker moves to a wider application of which this moment is an example. This transformation/deception
enables the poet to rediscover in imaginative ways objects and rename them, repossessing them with wonder; this moment demonstrates an interstice out of which comes revelation.

"Water Walker" (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems 1947) is another poem in Wilbur’s early work that is helpful for illuminating his method of bringing opposites together in order to produce an apocalyptic interstice. Paul Cummins, however, sees "Water Walker" as perfectly illustrating the idea of balance that he believes exists throughout Wilbur’s poetry:

Not only must man face the inevitability of death, he must face loneliness and incompleteness within life. Both themes flow throughout the poem "Water Walker." Wilbur again affirms the necessity of maintaining a balance between conflicting forces.

I agree that Wilbur looks at conflicting forces in "Water Walker," but I believe that these forces provide the poles between which an interstice is formed; Wilbur does not include these poles merely in order to demonstrate the necessity of balance.

"Water Walker" is one of the most complex of Wilbur’s earlier poems, containing the initially unlikely comparison of Paul the Apostle and a caddies fly. Both the caddies fly and Paul exist in a place ultimately between two worlds—the fly between air and water and Paul between the Jewish and
Gentile cultures of his time. Out of the interstice that this juxtaposition creates, Wilbur uncovers the richness (and sadness) of living between two worlds. One of the complexities of "Water Walker" comes from the speaker alternately thinking aloud about the caddies Fly, Paul, and his relationship with them. By the end of the poem, all three have been pressed together creating an interstice between their meeting.

The title "Water Walker" instantly calls to mind the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, or perhaps Peter—the only apostle who is reported to have been involved in a miracle of this type. Instead, Wilbur jars the reader with the first stanza, which is troubled by its lack of reference to either Jesus or Peter:

There was an infidel who
Walked past all churches crying,
Yet he wouldn’t have changed his tears,
Not for the smoothest-worn pew;
You’ve seen Caddies flies walking on spring-
surface, water walkers who breath
Air and know water, with weakly wings
Drying to pelt and sheen; (ll. 1-8)

Instead of fulfilling the promise of some mention of Jesus or Peter seemingly implied in the title, the poem begins with an anecdote about an infidel who seemingly is sad about his lack of faith yet does not desire to surrender his
unbelief for a place within church. The speaker makes an abrupt transition away from the infidel, seemingly trying to explain his problem by using something he claims the reader has seen: caddies flies. These flies replace Christ and Peter, the expected water walkers of the poem. By using the fly and the infidel the speaker establishes an interstice between belief and unbelief / air and water. Somehow, the speaker claims, they are connected. Using the phrase "you’ve seen" invites readers with their perceptions into the interstice that the speaker is creating to share a moment of revelation. The first stanza draws the reader in to see where the unlikely intersection between the infidel and the fly will lead.

At this point the speaker further convolutes and muddies the picture by bringing Paul into the poem, adding yet another element to the interstice he has already made:

There is something they mean
By breaking from water and flying
Lightly some hours in air,
Then to the water-top dropping,
Floating their heirs and dying:
It’s like
Paulsaul the Jew born in Tarshish, who when at bay on the steps
Hebrew intrigued those Jewsotted Jews
Crowding to stone and strike;
Always alike and unlike,
Walking the point where air
Mists into water, and knowing
Both, with his breath, to be real,
Roman he went everywhere: (11. 9-22)

The speaker brings the caddies fly into the poem to comment on its ability to live in two worlds simultaneously and its need to go back to the surface of the water to lay eggs (thus the "water walker" designation). By switching away from the infidel to the fly, the speaker quickly makes us aware that though the infidel is the beginning point in the poem, he is only an example of a larger meaning that evades the speaker.

Wilbur's use of "mean" fits nicely into the idea of interstice; the "something" that escapes and puzzles the speaker is a midpoint or mean between the poles that have been set in place in the poem. The speaker realizes that he almost has this "meaning" in his grasp, but he is unable to linguistically communicate what it is; instead he desperately reaches out for the example of Paul who is also a "water walker" of sorts. He was the apostle to the Gentile world and hated by many of the strict Judaizers; he fit into both worlds because he was a Hebrew (as he boasts in II Corinthians 11:22), but he also wrote the book of Galatians in which he proclaimed Christian freedom from the Jewish ceremonial law. The word "Roman" used to describe
him is apt since the Roman empire encompassed many cultures. Yet the speaker is also aware of the difficulty of the comparison, and using the line "Always alike and unlike" sums up his difficulty.

The confusion of the seeming merger of the caddies fly and Paul in the lines "Walking the point where air / Mists into water, and knowing both" is added to when the speaker unexpectedly summons his own past as a further example of the "something" he is trying to explain:

I've been
Down in Virginia at night, I remember an evening door
A table lamp lit; light stretched out on the lawn,
Seeming to ask me in;

I thought if I should begin

To enter entirely that door,
Saying, "I am a son of this house,
My birth and my love are here,"
I might never come forth anymore: (ll. 23-31)

The speaker seems to suggest with this recounting of old memory that it is somehow not desirable to belong to only one world, however inviting it may be; like the infidel in the first stanza who is tempted to join a church and take up a comfortable pew, the speaker is tempted by his familial
past and desires to embrace it. Yet he knows that to embrace the past is to become one-dimensional; there would probably be no escape ("I might never come forth anymore").

The speaker then compares his recollections to the armored larval life of the fly on the bottom of the lake that merely "abides, abides" (l. 40). The one-dimensional world of the larva and his family home are peaceful and involve no confusion—a simple world that is at rest but offers mere existence. The speaker relates the still world of the larva to a night he spent in Illinois where he rocked all night "silent and out of sight" (l. 45) observing the simple objects of the neighborhood. Just like the life of the larvae on the bottom of a pond, the populace lives peacefully unaware of what lies beyond their bedrooms at night. The key line in this section that establishes the tone and the comparison is "Minute, armoreal, deep" (l. 59). Just like the larva the people are small, armored and peaceful, yet perhaps smothered beneath the weight of their lives.

Suddenly switching to Saul/Paul, the speaker shows that Saul could have lived in such a peaceful one-dimensional world if he would have wanted, remaining a respectable tent-making pharisee instead of carrying "Jew visions to Greeks / For adoration or curses" (l. 57). Instead he becomes Paul a "stranger" to both worlds who trades peace for revelation and discovers "Heaven and hell in the poise / Betwixt
"inhabit" and "know" (ll. 63-67) This stanza is one of the crucial moments in the poem, revealing the reason the speaker chooses Paul as a representative for his own problem. Paul could never "discover heaven and hell" unless he became, like the caddies fly, an inhabiter of two worlds that are opposed to each other. He becomes "stranger" to both worlds not in the sense that he comes to know them less but rather in that in understanding them both he becomes strange in the eyes of those who live in each world. The life of Paul illustrates this phenomenon in that he was cursed and abused by much of the strict Jewish population and mocked by the non-Jewish people he sought to convert. Much of the flavor of Paul's New Testament writing comes from the apocalyptic interstices between Paul's dual experience in Jewish/Gentile worlds.

After using Paul as an example, the speaker of the poem turns back to himself in perhaps the most difficult part of the poem. In lines 68-79 he runs through a list of various experiences he holds in memory. He seems to be saying that since he has refused the one-dimensional life that familial memory offers, he has this jumble of personal memories instead that come from seeing opposite extremes such as the "opinions of salesmen" and the "ripe tones of priests" (l. 69). The question he asks (can he "rest" now like a larvae and yet live a life of awareness of various world phenomena) is unanswered in the poem; the speaker desires to
"precipitate" and "praise" what he sees as good from all things, even opposites, yet he remains uncertain if he can because he is not sure "what stays" (l. 79). This uncertainty characterizes the difficulty of trying to inhabit the interstice between extremes.

At the end of the poem the speaker surrenders to the dilemma that is revealed by the interstices he has created, claiming that those like Paul (and himself) who have found "how hid the trick is of justice" (l. 85) or seen that justice requires a many-sided viewpoint will never be able to return to a single-dimension life. The interstices between nonbeliever/convert, Paul/Saul, caddies fly/larvae reveals an existence paradoxically "tyrannical" and "cherished" because it hopelessly exiles the possessor from living in a solitary, peaceful, explicable world but at the same time offers types of knowledge and awareness not possible to a single-dimension world view.

"Marginalia" (Love Calls Us to the Things of This World 1956) is yet another of Wilbur’s poems that provokes the notion of apocalyptic interstices. The title, like "The Beautiful Changes," evokes a dual reading: marginalia are the notes written in a book margin, but the title also promises in a sense to be about margins. The margins or edges in the poem actually turn out to be interstices between different worlds.

In the first stanza Wilbur exploits the rich world
between water and air on the surface of a pond. In much the same way that "Water Walker" mines this same area, the first stanza of "Marginalia" examines the role of interstices in imaginatively uncovering hidden beauty:

Things concentrate at the edges; the pond surface
Is bourne to fish and man and it is spread
In textile scum and damask light, on which
The lily-pads are set; and there are also
Inlaid ruddy twigs, becalmed pine-leaves,
Air-baubles, and the chain mail of froth.
(11. 1-6)

This stanza has an incredible amount of hidden detail and subtle shades of meaning and tone all of which come out of the apocalyptic interstice between water and air. Initially this stanza sounds very much like a description of the compositional elements of a painting, something that Wilbur also does in "In a Dutch Courtyard" (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems 1947). This sense that we get of Wilbur describing a work of art and not just describing the debris which typically floats on a pond comes from phrases like "textile scum" and "damask light" and also "Inlaid" twigs and "Air-baubles." The stanza also suggests a banquet table. The word "spread" initially suggests this reading and is supported by one of the meanings of damask—"a fine twilled table linen." The lily pads add to this possible reading by suggesting place mats. None of these meanings is
insisted upon within the stanza; they exist simultaneously within the richness evoked by the interstice.

Another subtle trick in the stanza is that the list of "Things" concentrating on the surface of the pond is composed of opposites which themselves provide interstices that add to the greater interstice of water/air. "Textile Scum" and "Damask light" are double opposites: textile is typically a rough or raw material while damask is generally a rich, patterned, smooth cotton, linen or silk fabric. Scum and light also seem to exist at different poles. Scum is typically associated with ugliness, and light is associated with beauty. "Air-baubles" provides another sort of interstice: air is "soft" or penetrable while baubles or gems are hard. "Chain mail of froth" evokes the same sort of soft/hard interstice. All of these small interstices support the major apocalyptic interstice of the stanza (air/water) by further revealing the wealth of detail hidden between the two worlds.

The second stanza works in much the same way by evoking the interstice between sleep and waking:

Descending into sleep (as when the night-lift Falls past a brilliant floor), we glimpse a sublime
Decor and hear, perhaps, a complete music,
But this evades us, as in the night meadows
The crickets' million roundsong dies away
From all advances, rising in every distance.

(11. 7-12)

What is perhaps most satisfying about this stanza is the linking of going to sleep with riding down on an old-style elevator where the rider can see and hear snatches of beauty that are "perhaps" complete, although the rider never knows. Here, the same feeling of strangeness is evoked by knowing but not belonging to a particular world that Wilbur so brilliantly articulates in so many of his poems. The interstice between "glimpse" and "complete" wonderfully supports the notion of briefly grasping a revealed truth that slips away like the song of the crickets that fades away as you get close to it.

The final stanza is the most difficult because it moves away from the multiple images and tones evoked in the first two stanzas and tries to sum up the difficulty of revelation that comes from the interstices commented upon:

Our riches are centrifugal; men compose Daily, unwittingly, their final dreams, And those are our own voices whose remote Consummate chorus rides on the whirlpool’s rims, Past which we flog our sails, toward which we drift, Plying our trades, in hopes of a good drowning.

(11. 13-18)

This stanza has been much discussed, most helpfully by
Donald Hill and Bruce Michelson; both critics have noted in passing the boundaries evoked in the poem but each has focused on the difficult last stanza and interpreted it differently. Hill states the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory interpretation of the stanza, but then attempts to summarize it by saying that everyone is caught in the whirlpool of life and is being sucked into the central vortex while our dreams ride the outer edge and guide and encourage us. He goes on to conjecture that a "good drowning" might be a life that is not out of touch with its dreams or perhaps, if the "chorus" is the rest of humanity, we seek a death that meets the approval of the chorus. He sums up saying that no matter what the reading, it is obvious that the stanza "presents a striking image of doomed human life engaged in its characteristic struggle" (107).

Bruce Michelson convincingly places the poem in the context of Wilbur's struggle with the aesthetic values of Poe. Wilbur's argument with Poe is well documented not only by Michelson and other critics but by Wilbur himself in his essay "On My own Work." Wilbur desires the physical world to embody the spiritual world, while Poe (Wilbur claims) wants to escape the squalid physical world to a spiritual or dream world. "Marginalia," placed in the context of Poe's work, becomes a look at "the borderlands between states of awareness, between being and nonbeing, between temporality and some other sort of existence outside of time and the
world" (Michelson 70). He goes on to suggest that riding the whirlpool is to choose a life that is by nature in flux and thus imperfect, which is desirable to seeking perfection and denying the fluxuating quality of natural beauty human nature.

While I find both critic's suggestions helpful (particularly Michelson's), I would like to look at the last stanza in light of the previous two. Michelson says little about the first two stanzas and Hill suggests that all three stanzas are unconnected, perhaps composed at different times and then stuck together to make a poem (106). I think that reading the last stanza in relation to the other two (especially in light of the interstices) is helpful.

The idea of riches being "centrifugal" echoes the first line of the poem "things concentrate at the edges," but suggests the riches are thrown to the edges by a spinning force. The source of the centrifugal force comes three lines later in the shape of a whirlpool, a powerful image of apocalyptic interstice. By nature, a whirlpool's force must exert force outward even as it pulls inward and down. By using this paradoxical image, Wilbur seems to be suggesting that a destructive force must be applied in order for beauty to be produced. This reading is harmonious with the suggestion in the first two stanzas that the beauty that exists on the surface of a pond can only occur at the intersection of air and water and "complete" music can only
be heard temporarily on an elevator between floors. Likewise, only in the momentary interstice of human life between non-existence and perhaps higher existence, can fragile beauty be created.

"A Hole in the Floor" (Advice to a Prophet and Other Poems 1961) will provide the final example in this chapter of the way in which Wilbur employs apocalyptic interstice in his poetry. The major interstice in this poem is the space between floors of the speaker's house. Out of this space Wilbur uncovers the strangeness that is the source of life for the known and familiar. The poem begins with a subtle hint at the creative power of destruction that echoes the chasm of the whirlpool in "Marginalia":

The carpenter's made a hole
In the parlor floor, and I'm standing
Staring down into it now
At four o'clock in the evening,
As Schliemann stood when his shovel
Knocked on the crowns of Troy. (ll. 1-6)

Instead of using the word "cut" to describe the carpenter's opening, Wilbur uses "made." This simple word choice suggests that the meanings typically associated with "hole" (space or emptiness) are being played with. In much the same way that Stevens in "The Snowman" evokes a "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," Wilbur's hole in the floor becomes an "it" that the speaker stares into in
the second line. The word "now" evokes a constant present
tense reading for the action of revelation that occurs in
the poem. Thus the simple hole in the floor that would
initially indicate emptiness becomes in the course of the
poem a source of plentitude.

In each of the next three stanzas the speaker describes
objects he sees in the hole, each of which is imaginatively
translated in his mind to other seemingly unconnected
objects. In this way, the hole provides an inexhaustible
wealth of imagination. In the second stanza the old and new
sawdust colored "silvery gold" become "Hesperian apple
peelings" (ll. 11, 12). In the third stanza the joists that
run under the floor out of sight become "pure streets" (l.
15), and the radiator-pipe becomes a "shuttered kiosk,
standing / Where the only news is night" (ll. 21-22). These
transformations are revealed by the imagination of the
speaker, and are only made possible or revealed by the
apocalyptic interstice between floor and ceiling.

In the next stanza the speaker desperately tries to
figure out what the point of the temporary imaginative
illusions are as did the puzzled speaker in "Water Walker":

For God's sake, what am I after?
Some treasure, or tiny garden?
Or that untrodden place,
The house's very soul,
Where time has stored our footbeats
And the long skein of our voices? (ll. 25-30)
Each suggested answer to his search—"treasure," "tiny garden," "untrodden place" are short versions of those metaphors suggested in the first three stanzas (Schliemann’s archeological discovery of Troy, the garden of Hesperus, and the "pure street" suggested by the untrodden upon floor joists). The speaker rejects each of these metaphors because as he stares into the hole, he becomes aware that they are not, after all, what he is after.

In the last stanza the speaker uncovers the truth that he has been seeking from the hole and the interstice between the floor and ceiling:

Not these, but the buried strangeness
Which nourishes the known:
That spring from which the floor-lamp
Drinks now a wilder bloom,
Inflaming the damask love-seat
And the whole dangerous room. (ll. 31-36)

The speaker rejects the metaphors that imagination creates in the interstice of floor and ceiling and instead embraces the "strangeness" that is best likened to a spring of water. Clearly, the interstice between floor and ceiling, revealed by the hole is full rather than empty. Out of the interstice comes not only the weak metaphors that the speaker’s mind too quickly seizes upon but also the richer metaphor of a nourishing spring that provides life and a
sort of dangerous, sensual appeal to a normally everyday room. With the addition of new perception, the last stanza of the poem supports a dual reading of "hole" as "whole": the carpenter makes whole the speaker’s naturally prosaic vision of a room in his house by making a hole that shows the apocalyptic interstice between a floor and ceiling.

"The Beautiful Changes," "Water Walker," "Marginalia," and "A Hole in the Floor" all contain moments of apocalyptic interstice that are common throughout Wilbur’s poetry. All of these poems perhaps have moments of balance, but balance is not Wilbur’s most important goal or achievement. Instead he looks for or creates interstices from which comes much of the revelatory imagery and language of his poetry.

Claiming, as some critics do, that "balance" is Wilbur’s ultimate goal (even Cummin’s "dynamic balance") ultimately turns Wilbur’s poetry into a pointless if pretty game of creating order out of chaos. This charge is in fact regularly made about Wilbur’s poetry because "balance" is so often seen as its goal. Wilbur’s poetry on the other hand is interesting primarily because of the moments of uncertainty and the struggle for the "something" that so puzzles the speaker in "Water Walker." The moments of revelation that bring about a sense of certainty in some of Wilbur’s poems are created by a profound faith in the reality of the physical and spiritual worlds; Wilbur’s poetry continually seeks to suggest and hold out the hope
that "something" is there if we can just figure out what it is.
CHAPTER II

"THE SLIGHT UNCERTAINTY
WHICH MAKES US SURE"

Among the multitudes of apocalyptic interstices in Wilbur's poetry, none occurs more frequently than various forms of the interstice between spirit and matter. By drawing spirit and matter together, Wilbur insists that a proposition about either state is incomplete if it does not acknowledge the existence of both. This insistence invites the reader to puzzle out how propositions about either physical or spiritual worlds are possible when spirit seemingly can only be approached via faith or intuition and the physical world only through the often-fallible senses. Wilbur has worked on this puzzle repeatedly throughout the last forty years starting with the presupposition that though the physical senses may be compromised in some ways, we must rely on them. Assisted by spiritual faith and intuition, we can confidently speak and write about the physical world—a world that independently exists apart from the self.

He has also intimated repeatedly that an independent spiritual world exists apart from the self, but it can be best realized in incarnated forms. Paradoxically, then,
approaching the spiritual world is reliant upon grasping spiritual incarnations in matter, but since an uncompromised physical perception of matter is impossible, we must rely on intuition and faith. Wilbur presents this interconnectedness in the form of matter/spirit interstices in many of his poems and we must turn to these interstices to understand his treatment of spiritual and physical perception. Wilbur suggests in many of his poems that perceptions of both spirit and matter are often paradoxical, coming sometimes when the senses are in an abnormal state, whether magnified, blurred, or distorted. This blurring most often comes when spirit and matter are pressed together to form an interstice out of which come the various revelations which Wilbur’s poetry uncovers.

Wilbur’s view that both physical and spiritual realities exist and can be counted on to provide poles for interstices is readily apparent in two of his shorter, didactic poems “The Proof,” and “On Having Mis-identified a Wildflower.” In “The Proof,” (Walking to Sleep 1969) the speaker implies that his life and continued existence depend upon God’s power, and this belief in God and the world of spirit forms one side of the matter/spirit interstice:

Shall I love God for causing me to be?
I was mere utterance; shall these words love me?

Yet when I caused his work to jar and stammer,
And one free subject loosened all his grammar,

I love him that he did not in a rage
Once and forever rule me off the page,

But, thinking I might please him yet,
Crossed out delete and wrote his patient stet.
(1l. 1-8)

The title of this poem plays with the double meaning of "proof," which can mean not only evidence for some assertion, but also the trial sheets of manuscripts on which corrections are made. Thus the speaker seems to be suggesting that the evidence of God's existence is found in the patient corrections of the speaker's life.

The poem suggests that belief in spirit (in this case God) comes only when that spirit is manifested in physical forms or actions. The idea behind the poem also seems to be an echo from the twelfth chapter of Hebrews which states that God "disciplines those he loves as sons." As Hyatt Waggoner says, this poem, written late in Wilbur's life illustrates Wilbur's "increasing tendency to write openly about his basic commitments" (597). If these "basic commitments" were so clearly stated in the rest of Wilbur's poetry, it would quickly lapse into petty didacticism, but instead the bulk of his poetry relies on apocalyptic interstices to uncover his spiritual concerns. Wilbur's
method of using interstices has resulted in compelling poems like the justly famous, frequently anthologized "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" (Things of This World 1956). In this poem and countless others he demonstrates his commitment to the reality of the spiritual world, polarized by his equally strong belief in the reality of the physical world independent from the self and its senses.

In "On Having Mis-identified a Wildflower" (New Poems 1987) Wilbur notes the reality of the physical world apart from his inexact senses and fallible mind:

A thrush, because I'd been wrong,
Burst rightly into song
In a world not vague, not lonely,
Not governed by me only. (ll. 1-4)

The physical world that Wilbur evokes is not solipsistic, devoid of substance or objectivity; it is solid enough to provide one of the poles for his matter/spirit interstice. Wilbur notes the importance of physical reality to his poetry in his essay "The Bottles Become New Too":

Poets can't afford to forget that there is a reality of things which survives all orders great and small. Things are. The cow is there. No poetry can have any strength unless it continually bashes itself against the reality of things. (217)

It is significant that Wilbur uses the phrase "bashes itself" here; the bashing is a testing of limits, a constant
renewal of faith in reality. In fact, the meeting of interstices is a form of this violent bashing that results in stronger and deeper belief. Wilbur's poetry, instead of being about either spirit or matter exclusively, takes both into account (or bashes them together) and then goes about the business of exploring and noting the discoveries that occur in the interstices between them.

In "The Eye," (The Mind Reader 1976) the importance of the physical senses in the matter/spirit interstices of Wilbur's poetry becomes evident. In two stanzas that present two separate ideas, the speaker closely examines physical vision and brings it together with spiritual vision in order to produce an interstice out of which comes "correct" vision—a sort of revelation that is neither totally physical or spiritual but which relies on both.

In the lengthy first section of the poem, the speaker describes a morning that he spent at St. Thomas with a pair of binoculars, establishing the power of physical vision—one half of the major interstice in the poem. The binoculars enhance his physical vision so he can see far-off detail such as the book that someone is reading on the mountain slope above him as well as the name of a shuttle boat out on the bay. This enhanced vision gives the speaker such a feeling of power that he continues to look through the binoculars all morning long. When the speaker asks himself why he continues to look, he admits that though he
probably hoped for "lewd espials" or was interested in framing the landscape, he was mainly attracted by something else:

... . . . that my eye should flutter there,
By shrewd promotion, in the outstretched air,
An unseen genius of the middle distance,
Giddy with godhead or nonexistence. (11. 25-28)

The word genius operates dually, meaning both a creative or intellectual power or a prevailing spirit of a place. These two meanings are reinforced by the words "godhead" and "nonexistence," the idea of an unseen but all-seeing god juxtaposed with the idea of his vision projected but not really existing in "the middle distance" at all. Thus an interstice between the power and weakness of the physical senses is established out of which comes a narcissistic tone as the speaker becomes obsessed with examining his physical vision.

The poem's tone changes in the second section, evoking the other half of the major interstice—spiritual vision. The section begins by imploring St. Lucy, the patroness of those with afflicted sight, to save the speaker from "the eye's nonsense," seemingly a comment on the narcissistic discovery of self that has come before in stanza one. The word "nonsense" evokes both the feeling of something without sense, and sensation that needs something outside of itself to arrange it into something coherent. Besides the
"nonsense" of narcissistic physical vision explored in the first stanza, the second section examines another type of dangerous nonsense: looking at the world through purely spiritual lenses.

The first example of an object that could be subject to purely spiritual vision is the salesman on the bus seat whose wide-open mouth is "banjo-strung with spittle." Instead of recoiling with disgust, because of a purely spiritual hatred of the physical world, the speaker wants to be reminded that his vision is not a curious angel (echoing the genius or godhead view in the first section), and he wants to be aware that he himself is a "rumpled" passenger—an incarnated being, neither simply spiritual nor physical. The interstice between spirit and matter is also emphasized with the speaker's supplication to St. Lucy since a saint is also a sort of interstice between God and human, spirit and matter. Thus, the speaker desires the sort of vision that comes only out of an interstice between spirit and matter.

This desire for "corrected vision" continues as the speaker asks Lucy's blessing on his sight so that he can see in everything physical (not only in the "doublepike with layout" but also in the legless man and blind woman) "the beat of spirit." The last two stanzas, therefore explicate the speaker's idea of a "correct vision":

Correct my view
That the far mountain is much diminished,
That the fovea is prime composer,
That the lid's closure frees me.

Let me be touched
By the alien hands of love forever,
That this eye not be folly's loophole
But giver of due regard. (ll. 49-56)

These last two stanzas also demonstrate the speaker's insistence that both the exterior world as well as the self exist. The fovea centralis is the part of the eye that constitutes the area of most distinct vision, and the speaker claims that to see the perceiver as arranger of the exterior world is incorrect. Instead, the speaker desires to be touched by the external or "alien" world of love and enabled to praise what deserves to be praised—the beautiful along with the unsightly. Only by using the corrected vision that comes from the interstice between spirit and body can the speaker know what should be duly regarded.

This same corrected vision can be seen in "Icarium Mare," (New Poems 1987) which in many ways seems to restate the argument that has taken place in "The Eye." As Peter Stitt says, the poem begins by "drawing a distinction, familiar . . . by now, between the ideal, Platonic, spiritual realm above and the realm of reality here below" (36). Wilbur creates this distinction in order to draw the two worlds together to form an apocalyptic interstice out of
which he produces the possibility for intuitively understanding the same "something" that he evokes in "Water Walker":

We have heard of the undimmed air
Of the True Earth above us, and how here,
Shut in our sea-like atmosphere,
We grope like muddled fish . . . (ll. 1-4)

This stanza of groping vision echoes the first section of "The Eye" in which the speaker must use binoculars to clearly see what he looks at in the distance. Instead of empowering the physical eye, however, as he does in beginning "The Eye," Wilbur here looks at the eye's (reputed) weakness in comparison with the pure vision possible in Plato's "True Earth."

Wilbur moves from the Platonic statement of the problems of physical eyesight to three examples of interstice between Plato's spiritual world and the shadowy physical world he claims we inhabit. He uses Icarus, the Apostle John, and Aristarchus as examples of people who received revelation from the interstice between the spiritual and physical worlds:

... Perhaps from there,
That fierce lucidity,
Came Icarus; body tumbling, flayed and trench
By waxen runnels, to be quenched
Near Samos riding in the actual sea.
Where Aristarchus first
Rounded the sun in thought; near Patmos, too,
Where John's bejeweled inward view
Described an angel in the solar burst.

The reckoner's instruments,
The saint's geodic skull bowed in his cave--
Insight and calculation brave
Black distances exorbitant to sense,
Which in its little shed
Of broken light knows wonders all the same.

(11. 5-18)

Aristarchus of Samos, an astronomer of the third century
B.C., proposed that the sun is the center of the universe.
"Reckoner" is a particularly fitting word for Aristarchus
because the word contains the idea of computation as well as
the idea of regarding or assuming--a sort of faith.
Aristarchus' mathematical calculations are meshed with the
belief in the final outcome of his calculations. While his
idea about the composition of the universe were not totally
accepted, it was a novel concept stretching the limits of
what was believed.

The apostle John, exiled on the island of Patmos, saw a
vision of Christ which he recorded in the first chapter of
Revelation: "In his right hand he held seven stars, and out
of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was
like the sun shining in all its brilliance." John transcend the physical world around him by "insight;" the words "geodic skull" work incredibly well to describe John's vision because his skull contains his grand vision like the rough exterior of a geode hides its interior crystal formation.

John's spiritual insight and Aristarchus' scientific calculation transcend the limits of physical vision just as the mythological character Icarus transcends gravity by means of his father's creative imagination. Imagination, insight and calculation all come out of the "little shed of broken light" that describes the physical body and its fragmentary perceptions. Icarus buys his "knowledge" of the sun's power with his life, and even though John and Aristarchus gain their revelation from different sorts of "interior views," they also must rely on physical perceptions (primarily of the sun) to express what has been uncovered. All three men inhabit temporarily the interstice between the physical and spiritual worlds, and all three evoke narratives that contain types of revelation that go beyond simple facts.

"Icarium Mare" ends with the simple statement that the physical world is not an "outer dark / But a small province haunted by the good, / Where something may be understood" (ll. 25-27). Just as in "The Eye" and "Water Walker," this something cannot be named; it can only be understood
intuitively when the matter/spirit interstice is evoked. Even then, the speaker says, we only "gather tokens of the light / Not in the bullion, but in the loose change" (ll. 30-31). The spirit/matter interstice provides us with inexact knowledge, perhaps, but the "something" we are left with is a valuable revelation nonetheless.

The "tokens" of revelation from the spirit/matter interstice that Wilbur mentions in "Icarium Mare" are echoed in "Advice from the Muse," a poem from the same volume (new poems, 1989). The first three stanzas of the poem mention the ways that writers tell stories or describe scenes, either predictably or leaving out something that we learn only at the end of a story; the last two stanzas detail the "advice" mentioned in the title:

Still, something should escape us, something like
A question one had meant to ask the dead,
The day's heat come and gone in infra-red,
The deep-down jolting of a pike . . . (ll. 25-28)

This "something" that should escape us is not only the something in "Water Walker," "Icarium Mare," and many other poems; it is the something of Robert Frost's poem "For Once, Then Something" as well. Frost, like Wilbur, is only able to guess what the something is: "What was that whiteness? / Truth? A pebble of Quartz? For once, then, something" (ll. 14-15). Whatever the something is, it comes only from the interstice between the worlds of spirit and matter.
Just as Icarus, John, and Aristarchus gain insight about some truth beyond their immediate physical surroundings by use of the sometimes faulty physical senses, so also in the last stanza of "Advice from the Muse," the muse indicates that the moment of revelation comes from a merging of the physical senses with something beyond them: "A breath, which, drawing closer, may obscure / Mirror or window with a token blur— / That slight uncertainty which makes us sure" (11. 37-40). The obvious connection between spirit and breath seen in the Greek word "Pneuma" is evoked in this moment of breath fogging a window because the temporary blurring of the senses is actually used as a token of the spiritual world beyond the senses.

This blurring from the effects of the interstice between two sorts of reality aptly describes what happens to John who in the moment of revelation describes himself as "in the Spirit." His revelation does not describe literal, physical reality that he "sees" around him, but he strains to communicate what is revealed in terms of images that do exist in the world around him, leading to the baffling metaphors that exist throughout the book of Revelation. In the same way, Aristarchus describes his revelation that the Earth is not the center of the universe, but he still has inexact knowledge, claiming that the sun is the center instead. Both men try to communicate something beyond the range of their ability to express, yet there is something
"blurred" about their means of expression. This blurring and uncertainty, Wilbur says, makes us sure of the truth of what is revealed, even if it is simultaneously re-veiled. The implication here is that anything that involves too much certain physical or spiritual detail probably is not revelation from the realm of spirit, but rather revelation created by the mind.

One of Wilbur's earliest poems, "A Dubious Night," (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems 1947) expresses this same paradox that comes from the matter/spirit interstice. By focusing on the blurring of hearing and sound, the speaker in the poem is able to demonstrate that the realm of spirit is revealed most clearly in moments of uncertain or unnatural perception. The first three stanzas of the poem set up an interstice between sight and sound, initiating a conflict that is only relieved later in the poem:

A bell diphthonging in an atmosphere
Of shying night air summons some to prayer
Down in the town, two deep lone miles from here

The first line of this complex short poem is worth much commentary just for its use of a diphthonging bell, the interstice that sets up the major theme of the poem. A diphthong is normally a complex speech sound beginning with one vowel and moving to another vowel within the same syllable. Typically, a bell's sound is not thought of in
terms of a speech, but in this poem the idea of a bell's noise as some sort of comprehensible language provides the spirit/matter interstice that works throughout the poem. The bell, summoning "some to prayer" identifies it as a church bell of some sort and establishes it as the source of the spiritual half of the spirit/matter interstice in the poem. After establishing the bell as the source of spiritual communication, the speaker thrusts it together with the "shying" night air, subjecting it to confusion:

Yet wallows faint or sudden everywhere,
In every ear, as if the twist wind wrung
Some ten year’s tangled echoes from the air.
(ll. 1-6)

The bell is recognized by "some" as a summons to prayer even though its voice is distorted, but all who hear it notice the strangeness of its sound distorted by the wind. The "tangled echoes" effects of the bell on the language of the poem are reflected in the sounds of these three lines: "in every ear" is an echo of "everywhere," while the alliteration in "twist wind wrung" and "ten year’s tangled" provide an echoing form for the content of the lines.

In the third stanza, the spiritual nature of the bell’s voice is emphasized, but again lost temporarily when the bell’s noise (and spirit) are blurred by the thick night atmosphere:

What kyries it says are mauled among
The queer elisions of the mist and murk,
Of lights and shapes . . . (ll. 7-9)
The kyrie or liturgical prayer, typically beginning with or composed of the words "Lord have mercy" is mercilessly "mauled"—handled roughly or split in the night air. The phrase "queer elisions" (omissions of an unstressed vowel or syllable) reemphasizes the vocal quality of the bell, but also the distorted and alien nature of the communication.

The speaker does not assign an agent to the mauling in these stanzas, and it is easy to blame the confusion on the night, but the last four lines of the poem assign agency to the message of the bell as well as its rough handling in the night:

. . . the senses were unstrung,

Except that one star's synecdochic smirk
Burns steadily to me, that nothing's odd
And firm as ever is the masterwork.

I weary of the confidence of God. (ll. 9-13)
The last four lines of the poem clarify the confusion that has preceded them by placing the bell's speech as well as the distortion of the night into the hands of God, whose "masterwork" firmly controls both sides of the spirit/matter interstice. The idea of senses being "unstrung" can mean being emotionally distressed or musically incapacitated or,
paradoxically, set free. This paradox suggests that being physically incapacitated or having the physical senses blurred provides a sort of freedom wherein revelation can take place. The poem when seen in light of the last lines becomes an interstice between spirit and matter producing the revelation for the speaker that God's work is firm; paradoxically, the speaker's revelation comes only out of the interstice between the spiritual message of the bell and the distorting effects of matter initially producing miscommunication.

The sort of communication that is offered by the bell (and the poem) is revealed by the words "synedochic" and "confidence." Synecdoche is a figure of speech by which a more inclusive term is used for a less inclusive term or vice versa. Just as the appearance of the star does more than shine in the night sky, the bell, distorted by the wind and air also reveals something of the spiritual world. The word "confidence" in the last line of the poem emphasizes the surety of the communication in two ways: God is confident in his ability to communicate by means of the physical world, and the speaker is a confidant of God to whom the message is transmitted; in this way, the poem becomes a clear version of the bell's message that initially seems lost in the murk.

Up to this point, we have only looked at the matter/spirit interstice as producing revelation that can in
some manner be embraced. In contrast with the revelation given to the speaker in "A Dubious Night" of a confident God willing to confide, the speaker in "On the Eyes of an SS Officer" (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems 1947) has a "makeshift God" who seems removed from the revelation offered. The speaker is not at all confident, and he ends the poem on an uncertain note. Several interstices of perception are created in this poem, but what comes from these interstices is so horrible that the speaker must ask God to release him from the knowledge.

The poem’s first two stanzas provides fire/ice, spirit/matter poles to provide an interstice later in the poem:

I think of Amundsen, enormously bit
By arch-dark flurries on the ice plateaus,
An amorist of violent virgin snows
At the cold end of the world’s spit.

Or a Bombay saint asquat in the market place,
Eyes gone from staring the sun over the sky,
Who still dead-reckons that acetylene eye,
An eclipsed mind in a blind face (ll. 1-8)

Amundsen, the explorer lost in the arctic circle in 1928, and the Bombay saint are compared because they each worship extreme forces of nature, which ultimately destroy them. The explorer’s and the saint’s obsessions with one pure
element contrast with the type of the revelation offered in the other poems we have discussed. Instead of seeking an interstice between fire and ice the saint and the explorer seek each individually. Amundsen explorations seems to represent obsession with physical revelation, while the saint’s desire for insight from the sun perhaps represents a purely spiritual search for wisdom. The speaker in this poem uses "reckons" as does the speaker in "Icarium Mare." In this poem, the word is again used for its double meaning of calculation and faith, but in this case the faith is dead since it has been destroyed by the saint’s single-minded search for purely spiritual wisdom. The vision of both men supports the paradox seen in the other poems: by focusing purely on one world (either spiritual or physical) the senses are not blurred—they are destroyed. "Correct" vision does not take place for either the saint or explorer because their perceptions of reality do not come from the matter/spirit interstice.

The speaker moves from demonstrating the powerful but destructive poles of fire and ice to the interstice of the third stanza. In this stanza, a spirit/matter interstice is evoked, but the revelation is still destructive:

But this one’s iced or ashen eyes devise,
Foul purities, in flesh their wilderness,
Their fire; I ask my makeshift God of this
My opulent bric-a-brac earth to damn his eyes.
The fire/ice, spirit/matter interstice that occurs in the SS officer's eyes reveals the twisted final solution of the Nazis. The harsh physical solution of the Nazi social architects comes from their belief that other races are nonspiritual and subhuman.

Compared to the God of confidence portrayed in "A Dubious Night," the God of this poem is only "makeshift," and the speaker seems only to believe in him because of the wealth of detail that the earth contains. In this poem, however, the speaker is not wearied but horrified at the revelation the interstice offers and begs God to "damn" the eyes or source of the "foul purities" of the Nazis. "Foul" also perhaps operates as a verb, suggesting that the eyes are not only the source of the foul purities, but they also destroy purities that exist. "Damn" suggests not only sending to perdition but also damming or blocking the revelation that is thrust on the speaker by the horrible interstices of fire and ice, purity and foulness, that exist in the eyes of the SS officer.

The dramatic poem "The Aspen and the Stream" provides a good final example of an interstice between matter and spirit evoking a struggle with revelation. The aspen and the stream in this poem are much like the explorer and saint in "On the Eyes of an SS Officer." The aspen in this poem is not unlike Amundsen, interested in the physical world,
and the stream seeks escape from the raw, physical world. The juxtaposition of the extreme positions on self identity that aspen and stream take produces an interstice out of which is revealed the paradoxical difficulties of seeking selfhood.

The poem begins as the aspen loftily praises the stream's ability to reflect the world. The aspen's speech is poetic and non-practical:

Beholding element, in whose pure eye
My boughs upon a ground of heaven lie—
O deep surrendered mind, where cloud and stone
Compose their beings and efface your own,
Teach me, like you, to drink creation whole
And, casting out my self, become a soul. (ll. 1-6)

The aspen admires the stream because it thinks the stream captures much of the physical world in its constant reflection; the aspen finds this state of being desirable because it believes that to become totally reflective is to come into the power of the surrounding world.

The stream is disgusted with the aspen's gushy description of what it thinks the stream's existence is like and answers the tree sharply:

Why should the water drink,
Blithering little tree?
Think what you choose to think,
But lisp no more to me.
I seek an empty mind.
Reflection is my curse.
Oh, never have I been blind
To the damned universe,

Save when I rose in flood
And in my lathered flight
So fouled myself with mud
As to be purged of sight. (ll. 7-18)

Wilbur establishes two poles in the opening speeches of the aspen and the stream between purity/foulness, or blindness/sight. The stream wishes to destroy reflection because it imposes the exterior world on itself and hides its nature; ironically, the stream is unable to realize that one of the identifying aspects of water is reflectivity. The aspen sees the reflective quality of water as desirable and wishes to become something more powerful and all encompassing than it is.

In his book, Richard Wilbur, Hill has an interesting discussion on the similarity of the stream’s and aspen’s aims, noting that "Both the aspen and the stream want to cast out self and become souls, but they differ as to how to do it" (137). I agree with his statement as far as the stream is concerned because it clearly states its desire in the ninth stanza to "be self no more;" however, the aspen’s desire is more complex. The aspen is obviously interested
in beings outside of itself like the crows and crickets
teaching it their names (1. 22); however, the aspen is also
something of a narcissist as we see in the opening line
where it addresses the stream admiringly because it sees its
own reflection. Thus the aspen could be said to be seeking
self enhancement or elevation by swallowing or containing
those beings around it.

The stream on the other hand seeks an existence
untinctured with the "damned universe" external to itself.
Hill believes the stream is interested in "self
annihilation," the way, he says, of oriental mystics or the
extreme ascetic "who drives out of his mind all thought and
will, if he can, to contemplate nothing" (139). This polar
view of the world can be seen in the "Bombay Saint" of "On
the Eyes of an SS Officer" who blinds himself to the
exterior universe by means of the sun. The stream is also a
sort of ascetic saint, seeking to achieve this same type of
blindness through motion and darkness, the physical
counterparts of stillness and light necessary to reflection
and spiritual concentration:

There may be rocks ahead
Where, shivered into smoke
And brawling in my bed,
I’ll shred this gaudy cloak;

Then, dodging down a trough
Into a rocky hole,
I'll shake the daylight off
And repossess my soul

In blackness and in fall,
Where self to self shall roar
Till, deaf and blind to all,
I shall be self no more. (ll. 25-36)

The stream's refusal to be a source of reflection is a refusal of "the alien hands of love" necessary for the "corrected vision" of "The Eye." Its contempt for the exterior world reveals the problems inherent with focusing on pure spirit while ignoring physical reality.

The aspen, on the other hand, reveals the problems inherent in a love for the merely physical or a belief that the merely physical can satisfy the demands of soul. Like Amunsden the explorer, the aspen seeks a pure awareness of the physical world without concern for spiritual realities; this desire does not lead to destruction or death like Amundsen's, but it does result in a frustrating life characterized by mere physical growth and aging:

Out of your sullen flux I shall distil
A gayer spirit and a clambering will,
And reach toward all about me, and ensnare
With roots the earth, with branches all the air--
Even if that blind groping but achieves
A darker head, a few more aspen leaves.

(ll. 37-42)
The aspen is determined to think positively and continue its attempt to encompass ever more of the space around it even if the attempt comes to nothing. The words "ensnare" and "grop[e]" throw an ominous sound into this last stanza, and push the reader out of the poem with the feeling that something is amiss with the aspen's approach to existence.

Ultimately, the poem suggests that both the aspen's and the stream's attempts to reach some sort of identity or soul are doomed to failure because they are one-dimensional. Wilbur uses the stream and the aspen as poles for an interstice that reveals the difficulty that living in a world between spirit and matter offers. The stream and the aspen face the same difficulty as Paul/Saul in "Water Walker" as well as many of the figures and speakers in the other poems discussed. These poems continually pose the question "Is the self formed by acceptance of the world or renunciation?" They answer quietly that the self is formed and lives paradoxically in the interstices between spirit and matter, blindness and sight, perception and faith, renunciation and acceptance.
CHAPTER III

"THAT COMMON DOOR"

A discussion of Wilbur’s use of the interstice between matter and spirit would be incomplete without an examination of the role that figures of death play in his poetry. As might be expected considering Wilbur’s view of the necessity of both matter and spirit to a correct perception of reality, Wilbur’s poetry consistently portrays death as an inevitable part of life. Instead of separating death and life, embracing one and recoiling from the other, Wilbur brings the two together to form an interstice out of which comes the idea that as death is part of life, life disassociated with death is to be rejected. Wilbur’s poems on death, when viewed together, present a complete picture: poems such as "The Undead," "Beasts," "Year’s End," and "The Pardon" demonstrate the necessity of living gracefully with the knowledge of death while poems such as "For K. R. on Her Sixtieth Birthday," "For W. H. Auden," and "For Dudley" provide the opposite pole—an awareness of the emotional turmoil that death brings. From between the interstices created by these two poles comes the knowledge that while death may bring sorrow (even anguish) a notion of life that refuses the knowledge of death is not truly life.
Ironically, one of Wilbur’s most important poems that deals with death is titled "The Undead" (Advice to a Prophet 1961). In "The Undead" Wilbur metaphorically uses the subject of vampires to comment on those who fanatically attempt to maintain a hold on life by avoiding and denying death at any cost. The major interstice in "The Undead" is between death and life. The interstice reveals paradoxically that if life does not contain or control death, death will contain or control life. The "undead" in the poem illustrate death containing or feeding on life, while the children, thrush, and scholar demonstrate life containing death.

Wilbur does not actually let the reader know that he is discussing vampires until the ninth stanza; however he hints at what he is discussing by mentioning some of the traditional traits of vampires such as becoming active under a full moon, turning into bats, and failing to create a reflection in mirrors. The vampires represent the result of seeking a polar existence consisting of life without death. The first three stanzas of the poem relate how the "vampires" of the poem came to exist, noting that even before they became vampires the undead were not natural; they feared death and so lost life:

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.

Secret, unfriendly, pale, possessed
Of the one wish, the thirst for mere survival,
They came, as all extremists do
In time, to a sort of grandeur: (ll. 1-12)

The "undead" have embraced illusory dreams "even when quick
with monsters" or alarming nightmares because no genuine
danger is found in dreams; real waking life is full of
peril—"breakable toys" and "Compacts with the dying." The
phrase "compacts with the dying" suggests the agreements
that those living make with death: the living realize that
they are mortal, but they refuse to allow that knowledge to
blight their lives. The "undead," on the other hand, recoil
from the sobering awareness of death that even the
"stretched arms of withered trees" offer. The eighth and
ninth lines demonstrate the vampires' fearful obsession with
avoiding knowledge of death: "even under the plums of summer
/ They drifted like winter moons." Thus the undead are
unable to enjoy the fruit and warmth of summer (and life)
and instead live in a cold, restless state. The phrases "fearing contagion of the mortal" and "Secret, unfriendly, pale" suggest that the undead are afraid of the natural world and secluded from other people. In other words, the undead are actually lifeless in the midst of life. The undead desire only to continue as they are indefinitely. They are "possessed of the one wish, the thirst for mere survival." This desire has led to "a sort of grandeur," their terrible reputations as horrifying monsters.

The next five stanzas describe the vampires' present condition with a tone of sorrow or pity, but the pity is mixed with the judgement that the vampires are suffering from their own mistakes. The word "vulgar" in line fourteen is used to express an ironic double meaning: the bloodsucking vampires blindly believe the town and people that they avoided in their childhood to be vulgar or tainted with material existence; they do not realize that they themselves are vulgar or loathsome. Wilbur also notes another irony of the vampires' existence; the thirsting vampires desire life above all else but fail to capture it because this yearning causes them to retreat from the death that life contains:

Now, to their Balkan battlements
Above the vulgar town of their first lives,
They rise at the moon's rising. Strange
That their utter self-concern
Should, in the end, have left them selfless:
Mirrors fail to perceive them as they float
Through the great hall and up the staircase;
Nor are the cobwebs broken.

Into the pallid night emerging,
Wrapped in their flapping capes, routinely
maddened
By a wolf's cry, they stand for a moment
Stoking the mind's eye

With lewd thoughts of the pressed flowers
And bric-a-brac of rooms with something to lose,—
Of love-dismembered dolls, and children
Buried in quilted sleep. (ll. 13-28)

One of the most notable characteristics of the vampires'
dismal condition is that they leave no mark on the physical
world around them: they are not reflected in mirrors, nor do they disturb the cobwebs through which they pass. The loss of the essential ability to interact with the physical world is complete loss of self, as Wilbur indicates in lines sixteen and seventeen: "... Strange / That their utter self-concern / Should, in the end / have left them selfless." The vampires' only interaction with the physical world is preying on the innocent for their blood, the "children / Buried in quilted sleep" (ll. 27-28).
The children help form the other pole to the interstice in this poem. They are the opposite of the vampires because the dark world of the vampires is "safe" in the sense that it contains nothing to fear including death; the world of the children is a world "with something to lose" (l. 26). The seventh stanza points out the fragile nature of the everyday world in which the children live: the flowers are "pressed," the dolls are "love dismembered," and the innocent children themselves are "buried in quilted sleep." The pressed flowers are fading flowers, the dolls that the children love have been damaged by that love, and the children's sleep foreshadows their final state. All of these images of fragility indicate to the reader the obvious contrast between the children and the vampires. The children, though they live in an unsafe, fading, dying world, are truly alive; the vampires, even though safe in their "survival," are not truly alive—they are in the limbo state of mere existence as the title suggests.

Lines thirteen through fifteen point out the futility of the vampires' distorted passion for survival:

Then they are off in a negative frenzy,
Their black shapes cropped into sudden bats
That swarm, burst and are gone.

The "negative frenzy," of the vampires is "a hopeless frenzy. . . the negation of worldly reality, of the self, of all genuine possibilities of existence and the
understanding" (Michelson 255). The emotional tone of these lines is frustration. The words "frenzy," "cropped," "swarm," and "burst," all indicate a tremendous amount of vigorous energy, but the energy is misdirected; the vampires repeatedly gain their energy from living people. Their frightening existence is circular and endless. The vampires can only lust after life; they cannot live.

The last fourteen lines illustrate the sad paradox of those who try to live while denying death by comparing them to the people who know they are mortal but still seek to live unblighted, fruitful lives:

. . . . Thinking
Of a thrush cold in the leaves

Who has sung his few summers truly,
Or an old scholar resting his eyes at last,
We cannot be much impressed with vampires, Colorful though they are;

Nevertheless, their pain is real,
And requires or pity. Think how sad it must be
To thirst always for a scorned elixir,
The salt quotidian blood

Which, if mistrusted, has no savor;
To prey on life forever and not possess it,
As rock-hollows, tide after tide,
Glassily strand the sea. (ll. 31-44)

Compared with a thrush and a scholar who have lived genuinely before they died, the vampire is not impressive, only saddening. Both the scholar who has used his life in the dynamic pursuit of knowledge and the thrush which has brightened the world with its song have truly possessed life. The vampires crave life, and must, as the phrase "salt quotidian blood" suggests, feed on life daily. The vampires, however, never truly posses the life they seek because they fear that if they dare to live, they will die.

The last image in the poem compares the vampires to the tidal pools beside a sea. The image is doubly effective because it has a dual meaning. "Strand" can mean border, which stresses the vampires' marginalized existence. "Strand" can also mean "to leave behind"; the vampires have been stranded in a limbo state between death and life. Ironically, the vampires incorrectly occupy this interstice between death/life. They live a deathly existence which attempts to contain or feed on life, but just as the shallow water in the tidal pools dries up between tides, so the vampires or those who deny death cannot ultimately succeed in capturing life. Wilbur uses the death/life interstice to illustrate the paradox that healthy life must by nature contain death, while life that tries to continue without death is unhealthy and doomed to failure.
Wilbur hints throughout his poems on death that while most people are haunted with the temptation to deny death and wish to continue living no matter what the cost, animals are free from this temptation. Animals are almost held up as having an ideal attitude toward death, occupying the interstice between death and life—knowing death but continuing to live and reproduce. The first two stanzas of "Beasts" (Things of This World 1956) illustrates life containing death fearlessly, even violent death:

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. . . . (ll. 1-9)

The simple beasts enjoy a calm existence even in the midst of death. The meticulous language of the lines is peaceful, yet it describes a seemingly gruesome scene of death. The first stanza is dominated by soft words that create a feeling of serene security: "freedom," "slumber," "peace," "dreams," "leans," and "slept." These words are abruptly
jarred by the line in the next stanza "the ripped mouse safe in the owl's talon."

Unlike the vampires of "The Undead" who are alienated from life because of their attitude about death, the animals live contented lives within the natural order of the world. The scene which takes place in these stanzas is disturbing only to the humans who read the poem, not to the animals which it describes. The mouse is "safe"; he is secure in the ordered scene, his cry of concordance showing his agreement even as he dies. Donald Hill notes that "the violent death of beasts is only an aspect of the peace of the natural order; indeed, the owl's peace depends on the mouse's death; and the whole scene is harmonious and acceptable even to the mice" (108). Unlike the world of humanity, the world of animals includes the near certainty of eventual, violent death yet the animals are undisturbed. These animals are the exact opposite of the vampires of "The Undead" who cannot accept at all, much less cheerfully, the idea of mortality.

Wilbur stresses this same dichotomy in attitude toward death between humans and animals in "Year's End," (Ceremony 1950). The poem is set on a snowy New Year's Eve, and metaphorically describes the death of the year:

Now winter downs the dying of the year,
And night is all a settlement of snow;
From the soft street the rooms of houses show
A gathered light, a shapen atmosphere,
Like frozen-over lakes whose ice is thin
And still allows some stirring down within.

(ll. 1-6)

A sense of peace dominates the first stanza, communicated masterfully by the words "downs," "settlement," "soft," "gathered," and "shapen." These words serve to express, with a serene tone, the idea that the old year is almost over. The word "downs" is a pun that suggests either "to bring down" or "to soften." Metaphorically, the "death" of the year is made "easier" (literally softer) by the blanket of snow that is falling. Just as the world of nature is at peace on this night, so also the world of humanity. The light and atmosphere of the quiet houses are "gathered" and "shaped," indicating order and peace.

The second stanza continues the peaceful tone by comparing the image of the dead leaves solidly frozen in ice with swirling dancers transfixed in time. The frozen leaves are a picture of grace and peace throughout the winter because they are frozen in a lake:

I've known the wind by water banks to shake
The late leaves down, which frozen where they fell
And held in ice as dancers in a spell
Fluttered all winter long into a lake;
Graved on the dark in gestures of descent,
They seemed their own most perfect monument.

(11. 7-12)

The leaves, unlike the humans who erect tombstones, need no lasting monument or mark of remembrance for their death because they are "their own most perfect monument." They will last in the ice all winter long and be replaced on the trees by fresh growth in the spring. No despair is provoked by this stanza, rather calm acceptance of the cycles of life and death.

The next eight lines continue the theme of peaceful death in the non-human world. Just as the ice seems to catch the descending leaves in perfect moments of grace like frozen dancers, death does not capture animals or plants in an incomplete or unready state:

There was perfection in the death of ferns
Which laid their fragile cheeks against the stone
A million years. Great mammoths overthrown
Composedly have made their long sojourns,
Like palaces of patience, in the gray
And changeless lands of ice. And at Pompeii

The little dog lay curled and did not rise
But slept the deeper as the ashes rose. . . .

(11. 13-20)

Just as in the first stanza, the imagery and tone are peaceful. The plants and animals have no unfinished tasks
to complete when they die. The delicate fern displays "perfection" and the heavy mammoths display "patience" in their dying. The calm tone of the poem works against any trace of frantic fear from the death scenes. In fact, the dog buried at Pompeii is said to sleep deeper, undisturbed by the suffocating death that surrounds him.

In the fourth stanza, the language of the poem shifts. Wilbur moves away from talking about the death of animals, in particular the death of the dog at Pompeii, and begins talking about the death of humans and so creates a more disturbing, chaotic tone with his word choices. The same volcanic disaster that finds the dog sleeping finds "the people incomplete, and froze / The random hands, the loose unready eyes / Of men expecting yet another sun / To do the shapely thing they had not done" (19-24). The words "incomplete," "random," "loose," and "unready" all create a chaotic tone that reinforces the idea that humans are typically not ready to die. The buried humans in this stanza contrast with the frozen leaves in the second stanza: whereas the leaves are "their own most perfect monument," the people turned into statues or monuments by the lava of the erupting volcano are not "perfect." Instead, they are frozen in awkward attitudes of absolute incompleteness. Unlike plants and animals, they have not died gracefully or peacefully.

In the last stanza, the poem returns to the opening
scene of the New Year's snowfall and comments in solemn finality on the need people have for more time:

These sudden ends of time must give us pause.  
We fray into the future, rarely wrought  
Save in the tapestries of afterthought.  
More time, more time.  Barrages of applause  
Come muffled from a buried radio.  
The New Year's bells are wrangling with the snow.  
(11. 25-30).
The poem closes thoughtfully, realizing that people are almost never ready to die and always seek more time. Donald Hill notes this stanza's reflection of humanity's constant state of unreadiness:

Human beings at the moment of death are always incomplete. . . . It is because they always need more time that human beings cheer on the eve of the new year. . . . The snow is a symbol of death or the end of time; the bells are the voice of a new life, another chance for another year. (77)
The idea that many people resist death is reflected in the line "barrages of applause / Come muffled from a buried radio." "Barrages" evokes a warlike tone and is indicative of the battle between the living and death. The threat of being buried in the snow echoes the earlier mention of the mass burial that took place at Pompeii. Likewise, the snow, as an image of death, constantly threatens to overwhelm
humanity, and humanity constantly battles to maintain a firm hold on life. On this note of tension the poem ends; people demand "more time," while the snow continues to fall.

Wilbur firmly establishes in his death poems that the natural human reaction to death is fear and avoidance (leading in extreme cases to death swallowing up life). He does not, however, present only one side of the picture. The other pole in Wilbur's poetry that creates the interstice out of which comes his attitude toward death can be found in poems such as "The Pardon," (Ceremony 1950) "To K.R. on Her Sixtieth Birthday," (Walking to Sleep 1969) "For Dudley," (Walking to Sleep 1969) "Cottage Street, 1953" (The Mind Reader 1976) and "For W.H. Auden," (New Poems 1987). All of these poems try to achieve a stance to death that affirms life even in the presence of death.

In "The Pardon" Wilbur explores the interstice between two reactions to death—fear and pragmatism. Out of this interstice comes the a "corrected" response to death not unlike the corrected vision examined in chapter two. The speaker in the poem begins remembering the death of his pet dog:

My dog lay dead five days without a grave
In the thick of summer, hid in a clump of pine
And a jungle of grass and honeysuckle-vine.
I who had loved him while he kept alive
Went only close enough to where he was
to sniff the heavy honeysuckle smell
Twined with another odor heavier still
And hear the flies' intolerable buzz.

Well, I was ten and very much afraid.
In my kind world the dead were out of range
And I could not forgive the sad or strange
In beast or man. . . . (11. 1-12)

The speaker notes that his youthful love for the dog was based on life; while the dog lived, the speaker loved him, but once the dog died, the speaker feared him since he represented death's invasion into his world. The youthful speaker's fear of the decaying dog parallels the undead vampires' fear of "contagion of the mortal." The child's attitude provides Wilbur with one of the poles for his death/life interstice out of which comes a corrected response to death.

The other pole in the poem comes in the brief statement of pragmatism in the speaker's father's reaction to death. Instead of avoiding the decaying dog, the speaker's father "took the spade and buried it" (ll. 12-13). This action is of tremendous significance; what is left unstated is that the father, like almost everyone, desires that death not be visible to everyday activity. His pragmatic approach is to bury death, hiding it from the living. The speaker
pointedly leaves out any mention of sympathy or explanation on the part of the father; when the father buries the dog without explanation, he buries as well his child's ability to understand and compassionately confront death.

Unlike the vampires who continuously reject the mortal, the child grows up to dream of the dog come back to offer him a chance to make the correct response:

... . . . Last night I saw the grass
Slowly divide (it was the same scene
But now it glowed a fierce and mortal green)
And saw the dog emerging. I confess

I felt afraid again, but still he came
In the carnal sun, clothed in a hymn of flies,
And death was breeding in his lively eyes,
I started in to cry and call his name,

Asking forgiveness of his tongueless head.
... I dreamt the past was never past redeeming:
But whether this was false or honest dreaming
I beg death's pardon now. And mourn the dead.
(11. 9-24)

The adult speaker must face what the child was unable to: the raw physical details of decay. Wilbur goes out of his way to fill the poem with nasty details of death such as flies, suggesting maggots and filth and the tongueless head,
suggesting putrid decay.

The adult speaker's initial reaction to the scene is just as the child's has been—fear in the face of terrible death. The adult speaker, however, is able to face the fear; in fact the multitude of rank detail the speaker provides is intended to make us aware that the speaker has stared long into the face of death and come away with a vivid impression. His long glance into death enables the speaker to formulate a corrected response to death, one he was unable to give during his childhood. Paul Cummins notes that the child's realization of death leads him to an awareness that everyone is mortal, but "The fortunate aspect of this fall is that [he] is now aware of imperfection and of the need for redeeming the past. Now that he can mourn death, he more fully understands the reality of life" (34). Wilbur uncovers this "corrected" response to death from the interstice produced by pushing together the child's initial fearful response and the father's cold pragmatism.

The same interstice between two approaches to death can be seen in "Cottage Street, 1953" (The Mind Reader 1976). This poem, much criticized by devoted followers of Sylvia Plath, examines two approaches to death from between which the speaker "corrects" his vision of death. Bruce Michelson's book Richard Wilbur: Music in a Scattering Time, contains a very helpful discussion of the background of this poem as well as its (generally angry) critical reception. I
will here only briefly attempt to place this poem within the context of Wilbur's other death poems.

Just as in "The Undead," "Year's End" and other death poems, Wilbur creates an interstice out of which he can reveal a "corrected" vision of death by juxtaposing two extremes. Sylvia Plath provides one pole of the life/death interstice and Edna Ward (Wilbur's mother-in-law) provides the other. The poem describes a meeting that took place between Wilbur, his wife, mother-in-law, and Plath and her mother. Plath is described as "pale, slumped" (l. 4) and as someone "who had wished to die" (l. 11). Ward is described as someone who has faced her "eight-and eighty summers" with "Such grace and courage as permit not tears, / The thin hand reaching out, the last word love" (ll. 18-20).

Wilbur remembers that he is unable to respond helpfully to Plath's depression that had recently led to a suicide attempt:

I am a stupid life-guard who has found,
Swept to his shallows by the tide, a girl
Who, far from shore, has been immensely drowned,
And stares through water now with eyes of pearl.

How large is her refusal; and how slight
The genteel chat whereby we recommend
Life, of a summer afternoon, despite
The brewing dusk which hints that it may end.

(ll. 13-20)

Just like the child in "The Pardon," Wilbur and his family are unable to confront successfully the strangeness that Plath's suicide attempt gives her. Plath's "refusal" of life echoes the vampires' refusal to join in the mortal world's "compacts with the dying." Wilbur's approach to Plath's attitude toward life is not mocking or condescending, but it is finally rejecting. In the last stanza Wilbur notes that Plath will outlive Edna Ward and "state at last her brilliant negative / In poems free and helpless and unjust" (ll. 27-28). Michelson notes that the last lines of "Cottage Street," which many critics have particularly vilified is Wilbur's attempt to place his poetry in position to Plath's, to state "his faith in obscure yet fundamental possibilities in life. And literally to save his soul, perhaps, he turns away from a vision which is otologically 'unjust,' meaning too certain in its hopelessness, as well as unfair" (157). Wilbur's critique of Plath's work can best be understood within the context of Wilbur's other death poetry. He is not insulting her or, as Ian Hamilton suggests, attacking a type of poetry that has eclipsed his own (999). Rather he is locating her attitude toward life in relation to Edna Ward's in order to create an interstice out of which can come a "corrected" vision of life and death.
Using this "corrected" vision of death, Wilbur is able to produce poems like "For K.R. on Her Sixtieth Birthday (Walking to Sleep 1969). This poem contains Wilbur's exhortation to a friend not to fear death as she grows older, using light imagery to communicate a hopeful tone even while mentioning the melancholic realization of eventual death:

Blow out the candles of your cake.
They will not leave you in the dark,
Who round with grace this dusky arc
Of the grand tour which souls must take.

You who have sounded William Blake,
And the still pool, to Plato's mark,
Blow out the candles of your cake.
They will not leave you in the dark.

Yet for your friends' benighted sake,
Detain your upward-flying spark;
Get us that wish, though like the lark
You whet your wings till dawn shall break:

Blow out the candles of your cake. (ll. 1-13)

The tone of the poem, a villanelle, is solemn without being sad. The rhythm and rhyme scheme of the poem, and especially the repetition of the line "Blow out the candles of your cake" create an almost chant-like quality that
generates a sense of the ceremonious. The repetition of the line "Blow out the candles of your cake" also emphasizes a consistent pattern of light and dark imagery in the poem. The images of light in the poem are the candles in the first and last stanzas, the "upward flying spark" and "dawn" in the third stanza. Darkness is emphasized by the words "dusky" and the repeated use of the word "dark." The repeated idea of aging and death contained in these lines is notably consistent with that contained in "The Undead." The confident admonition is to live life without fear.

The poem’s emotional tone is not pessimistic; life, "the grand tour which souls must take," is composed of concrete things such as the written word (Blake and Plato) and is worth living. Death is an upward movement, "the flying spark" and the flight of the lark. The abrupt moment of death is described as the time when "dawn shall break." These phrases have religious overtones which create a feeling of hope without overtly stating that the reason for hope is life after death. The light imagery convincingly triumphs over the dark imagery, and the poem ends with a final encouragement to live fully and "blow out the candles of your cake."

Wilbur does not downplay the power of death, nor does he respond to death by coldly refusing to mourn. He does "mourn the dead" after they are gone—just not before; he refuses to dwell on the ultimate end of everyone, but he
does recognize the sadness that death brings. In "For W.H. Auden" (New Poems 1987) Wilbur mourns the loss of the great poet who, he says "sustained the civil tongue / In a scattering time (ll. 13-14). Auden, Wilbur notes, dies just like all the common people who did not perform any particular service to society, like the "brakie loping the tops of the moving freight" and "the beautiful girls in their outboard waving to someone" (ll. 2-3). Wilbur is more poignantly aware of the commonality of death now that Auden himself has left the world by "that common door."

"For Dudley" (Walking to Sleep 1969) echoes "For W.H. Auden" in its remorse for the death of a great person and provides a fitting conclusion for the subject of death in Wilbur's poetry. Dudley is described as an exceptional man whose knowledge of Greek and sense of humor make him irreplaceable. "For Dudley," much like "To K.R. on Her Sixtieth Birthday," use light and dark imagery to depict the struggle between life and death:

And now the quick sun,
Rounding the gable,
Picks out a chair, a vase of flowers,
Which had stood till then in shadow.

It is the light of which
Achilles spoke,
Himself a shadow then, recalling
The splendor of mere being.

As if we were perceived
From a black ship--
A small knot of island folk,
The Light-Dwellers, pouring

A life to the dark sea--
All that we do
Is touched with ocean, yet we remain
On the shore of what we know. (ll. 13-28)

The images and tone of these lines stress a feeling of troubled uncertainty and a keen awareness of the lack of illuminating knowledge. The sun that makes physical objects visible is what the dead Achilles remembers. The living are viewed by the dead as "The Light-Dwellers," and everyone's life is moving toward the darkness, the ocean. These lines "emphasize the tenuous, threatened nature of life itself, and identify chaos, darkness, and death with the ocean" (Stitt 18). Thus, Wilbur is not depicting a pure, untroubled state of death. He does not deny that what (if anything) lies beyond the grave may be troubling. He cannot be accused, then, of denying the potential frightfulness of death; he wishes to look at death clearly (much like the child in "The Pardon") and have his life remain unblighted with the knowledge or lack of knowledge that examination
gives.

After noting the pain that the separation from his friend gives him, Wilbur ends the poem, giving light the last hopeful word. Embracing a belief in potential life after death may seem initially like a handy escape from the subject of death, but after the troubling examination of death that has preceded it, the last line "Light perpetual keep him" does not come across as a didactic mention of heaven, but rather as a hard-won belief clung to in the face of all the horror and pain that death brings. Ejner Jensen sees the last stanza as a type of benediction:

When Wilbur closes the final stanza with a benediction ('light perpetual keep him') he takes us to the point where no more can be said. But the questions remain, anguished yearnings of 'island folk,' puny creatures whose chief awareness is the ocean around us and whose most awesome mystery is the sacrifice of life to that dark sea. . . . the poem expresses pain as well--the pain of awareness, of a mind charged with grief yet unable to release its burden. Decorum is observed, but at a cost; and the cost is dearer to the one who sees and feels the desperation of man's inadequacy. Wilbur finds no easy release through anger or rant. He achieves a benediction even as he acknowledges that 'we remain / On the
shore of what we know.' (246).

The speaker is emotionally overwhelmed, but unlike the vampires in "The Undead," or the child in "The Pardon," he does not retreat from death, but faces it and manages to organize and express how he feels and what he thinks about the death of Dudley. This poem, like "For W. H. Auden" and "For K. R. On Her Sixtieth Birthday" contains the interstice Wilbur creates between polar reactions to death: death is to be confronted and mourned; refusing death is, as for the vampires, finally a refusal of life in the meantime.
Richard Wilbur writes about two primary facets of nature in his poetry: the physically appealing and the physically unappealing, the beautiful and the ugly. Not surprisingly, Wilbur praises the usual objects and phenomena in nature which are beautiful; however, he also celebrates and vindicates those objects in nature which are seemingly repellant. Wilbur's treatment of beauty and ugliness in nature is another example of his use of apocalyptic interstices; the beautiful and the ugly in nature provide two poles for an interstice out of which comes Wilbur's belief that everything in nature is good. The "goodness" of the physical world is based on a belief that all of the objects in nature fit into a great orderly whole. In this view, different parts of nature play different roles; some of the natural elements are decorative, and others play a more purely functional role. Still, both types of nature provide a valuable function in Wilbur's poetry; he creates the interstice between two disparate aspects of nature in order to reveal that both are necessary and neither should be slighted or hated.

Wilbur's celebration of beautiful nature may be
witnessed in "Orchard Trees, January" (New Poems, 1987) where he describes orchard trees in a blizzard. The poem is a playful exploration of the idea that trees are sentient and somehow feel in a human-like manner the harsh effects of snow and ice that winter brings. The poem also contains the more serious idea that suffering produces beauty:

   It's not the case, though some might wish it so
   Who from a window watch the blizzard blow
   White riot through their branches vague and stark,
   That they keep snug beneath their pelted bark.

   They take affliction in until it jells
   To crystal ice between their frozen cells,

   And each of them is inwardly a vault
   Of jewels rigorous and free of fault,

   Unglimpsed by us until in May it bears
   A sudden crop of solitaires. (ll. 1-10)

At first glance, it seems as if Wilbur were praising the new spring growth itself; however, he is actually praising the mysterious capability of the trees to produce the new growing buds from "affliction" and "frozen cells," green buds which eventually become the flower and the fruit. In other words, he is praising the frozen but creative
potential existing within the trees that, eventually, vanquishes the bitterness of winter and explodes into vigorous new growth in the spring. The awed celebration of creative life in this poem reflects Wilbur’s religious concerns discussed in chapter two:

Wilbur’s . . . intricately patterned poems reflect the discovery of patterns of natural beauty; the poet’s art thus strives to be an adequate analogy to the surrounding creation. The art of man mirrors the art of God. Creative energy finding its expression in natural and aesthetic form is what Wilbur continually contemplates, praises, and seeks to realize in his own writing. (Shaw 105)

"Orchard Trees, January" reflects Wilbur’s awareness of and concern for finding the hidden elements in nature that when revealed demonstrate what he believes is the handiwork of God; he constructs this poem around his notion of creative energy (one of the primary aspects of God) and also demonstrates the relationship between suffering death and being reborn—a concept central to Christianity.

Wilbur establishes the circuit of suffering, death, and rebirth by beginning the poem playfully and moving the reader to a more serious level by changing the tone through careful word choice. Although phrases such as "some might wish it so" and "keep snug" contribute to an initial sense of lightheartedness in the poem, the poem includes such
words as "riot" and "affliction" which create a tangible sense of painful suffering. The last line of the poem resolves the conflict created by the varying tone and indicates that acute suffering can produce potent beauty.

The emphasis on the ability of the trees to produce beauty transforms them into dynamic containers of creative energy. Wilbur's keen wit enables him to elevate the trees from mere passive vegetable objects into an almost animal-like life that interacts with the powerful, energetic forces of nature. The first example of word play comes in line four in the phrase "pelted bark," which suggests both the protective skin of an animal as well as the pounding violence of the winter storm. The idea of a sheltering animal skin is sustained by the word "snug," which reinforces the notion of warm safety.

The engaging idea of the trees having protective pelts and being sentient symbolically introduces the thought that the trees actively participate in winter; they "take affliction in," yet the quickened trees' harmonious participation in the winter storm enables them to produce "jewels rigorous and free of fault" in the spring. Wilbur suggests that trees are no less praiseworthy in the blizzards of winter than they are in the heat of the summer because their suffering during the winter "jells" into fruit. The word "solitaires" in line ten is a word play on the idea of loneliness, which further emphasizes the idea of
suffering, and on a single, small bud, a solitaire or gem, which produces fruit from which will come many more trees. The trees, when seen this way, symbolically provoke the sense that suffering produces beauty.

Wilbur describes the trees' beauty by moving from general to specific word choice. In line eight, the inward beauty of the trees is described as "jewels rigorous and free of fault," "jewels" standing as a general word for gemstones. In line ten, the poem shifts to a more specific type of gemstone—"solitaires" which are often diamonds. These "solitaires" become visible in the spring after being released from each tree's inner "vault." The poem ends with a high celebratory tone: the words "rigorous," "free of fault," and "sudden" suggest strength, perfection, and energy. Thus this poem contributes to the solid pole of beauty that stands opposite the ugly in Wilbur's poetry.

Another poem that establishes this pole of beauty in Wilbur's poetry is "Piazza di Spagna, Early Spring." In this poem, unlike "Orchard Trees, January," the main image seems mentioned only to evoke a sense of beauty for beauty's sake:

I can't forget
How she stood at the top of that long marble stair
Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette
Went dancing slowly down to the fountain-quieted square,
Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness,—not then a girl,
But as it were a reverie of the place,
A called-falling glide and whirl;

As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,
Rides on over the lip—
Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

(11. 1-12)

Donald Hill criticizes this poem because he is unsure that readers can "easily share the mood it evokes" (98). He goes on to claim that the poem "leaves [the girl's] glamour undisturbed, and we feel the need of a touch of real life for perspective" (99). These criticisms seem to ignore the comparison in the last stanza between the girl and a leaf in a stream drawn over a fall—a connection with "real life" in which Wilbur attempts to connect the mood which the vision of the girl brought into being with something commonly seen, and which brings about much the same mood.

"Piazza di Spagna, Early Spring" strongly supports the pole of beauty that stands on one side of the Beauty/Ugliness interstice that runs throughout his work. Many other poems accomplish the same task, reflecting the beautiful side of life that seems to exist gratuitously.
Wilbur repeats this theme throughout his work in poems such as "Hamlen Brook," (New Poems, 1987) "A Storm in April," (The Mind Reader, 1976) "Seed Leaves," (Walking to Sleep, 1969), "Two Quatrains for First Frost" (Advice to a Prophet, 1961), "Apology" (Things of This World, 1956), "A Courtyard Thaw, (Ceremony, 1950), "Praise in Summer," (The Beautiful Changes, 1947) as well as many others. Throughout these poems Wilbur establishes a solid pole of beauty in nature to press against ugliness.

Wilbur’s equitable praise of the ugly or unappealing in nature can be seen in the poems "Still, Citizen Sparrow," (Ceremony, 1950), "Children of Darkness," (Mind Reader, 1976), and "Junk," (Advice to a Prophet, 1961). In "Still, Citizen Sparrow" Wilbur uses the vulture, a bird typically thought of as ugly, to support the visually unappealing pole in his poetry. The ugly and unappealing stand opposite those objects in nature which have sensory appeal like those that appear in the above discussed poems. Out of the interstice created when the ugly and the beautiful are pressed together comes Wilbur’s notion of universal order and goodness.

In the title "Still, Citizen Sparrow" the word "citizen" initially introduces the idea of a political or geographical state, and this ironic meaning is sustained in the poem by the phrase "rotten office," which refers to the putrefying carcass of an animal as well as the vulture’s
designated duty as an officer of nature's society. The speaker in the poem argues that just as the small sparrow is a valuable citizen of this orderly state, so is the ungainly vulture. The sense and punctuation of the title seem to indicate that the speaker is completing a long argument with the "citizen" sparrow who stubbornly believes that the vulture is unnatural and ugly. To present an alternative view to the narrow-minded sparrow, the speaker both describes in extensive detail and defends the unpopular vulture, a creature which when seen closely appears repulsive, a fact that Wilbur can rely on his reader to be aware of. The poem begins as if it were a reply to the sparrow's complaints:

Still, Citizen Sparrow, this vulture which you

call

Unnatural, let him but lumber again to air
Over the rotten office, let him bear
The carrion ballast up, and at the tall

Tip of the sky lie cruising. Then you'll see
That no more beautiful bird is in heaven's height,
No wider more placid wings, no watchfuller flight.

(11. 1-7)

These seven lines accurately describe the common vulture, seen after eating a carcass. The ponderous vulture seems awkward on the ground, indelicately perched on the body of
the animal it is eating, but once it finally manages to fly with its belly full of meat, it will appear both beautiful and graceful, and the speaker stresses that while the vulture is in the air "there is no more beautiful bird in heaven's height." While this statement perhaps is meant ironically, suggesting that the vulture is only beautiful when seen at a distance, the speaker reinforces the beauty of the vulture's flight by describing the vulture's wings as "wide" and "placid." These wings allow the large vulture to "lie cruising" "at the tall tip of the sky." These two phrases stress the prodigious range and ease of the immense bird's flight.

The vulture's beauty in flight is not its most important attribute, however. The persistent speaker quickly turns from describing the physical attributes of the vulture (which can only be approved of from a distance) and points out to the happy-go-lucky citizen sparrow that the vulture makes it possible for it to live as he does:

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

(11. 9-12)

The vulture's role in nature is to stay constantly on the lookout for signs of death and to remove them. The tiny sparrow can live light-heartedly because the unhurried
vulture with his more somber, slow, watchful flight and large appetite keeps decay and visible signs of mortality hidden. Wilbur coins the word "watchfuller," in much the same way that Hardy coins "Powerfuller" in "Hap." The "er" ending momentarily breaks the rhythm of the line, focusing the reader's attention on the unusual power of the vulture to find decay from high altitudes.

The third, fourth, and fifth stanzas direct the sparrow to mankind for a further illustration of the principle of doing a distasteful job for the community of nature; the direction is ironic since more often humanity is sent to the animal kingdom for moral lessons as in Aesop's Fables or the Proverbs of the Bible. As in Proverbs where the sluggard is told to consider the ants, the speaker instructs the sparrow to compare the vulture with Noah. As related in the sixth chapter of Genesis, Noah is told by God to build an ark to save humanity from the coming flood. When the flood comes, Noah, like the vulture, rides high above the ground:

Thinking of Noah, childheart, try to forget
How for so many bedlam hours his saw
Soured the song of birds with its wheezy gnaw,
And the slam of his hammer all the day beset

The peoples' ears. Forget that he could bear
To see the towns like coral under the keel,
And the fields so dismal deep. Try rather to feel
How high and weary it was, on the waters where
He rocked his only world, and everyone's.
Forgive the hero, you who would have died
Gladly with all you knew; he rode that tide
To Ararat; all men are Noah's sons. (ll. 13-24)

Noah is not approved of by those who refuse to believe in a
coming flood and who undoubtedly believe him foolish. The
words "bedlam," "wheezy," and "slam" in the fourth stanza
all effectively communicate the tone of angry disapproval
Noah's neighbors feel. In the same way in which the "wheezy
gnaw" that Noah's saw makes offends the ears of his
neighbors, the gnawing of the vulture on dead flesh as well
as its repulsive appearance offend the sensibilities of
"citizen sparrow."

Noah, however, is able to overcome both his neighbor's
disapproval and his own loneliness to build the ark and,
when the flood comes, to "mock mutability" and "keep nature
new" by preserving a remnant of the human and animal
species: "Noah . . . like the vulture, ignores the
restrictions of conventionality and has the courage to
acknowledge the reality of death and to bring in new life"
(Cummins 31). The schoolmaster tone of the poem becomes
more melancholic as it recounts Noah's voyage over the
flooded, dead world in the seventh stanza with the words
"dismal" and "drear"; but this sad tone changes to a
somewhat celebratory note by the end of the poem, evoked by
the words "hero" and "gladly." The speaker finishes
instructing the sparrow by reminding him that all men are
Noah's sons, expressing the debt that humanity owes to
Noah's courage; the phrase "Noah's sons" perhaps also
suggests that in some way we reflect Noah's heroic character
in our everyday tasks.

The speaker thus uses the example of Noah to close his
argument with the sparrow. The speaker transforms the
vulture from a vile, hated source of ugliness into a
symbolically beautiful bird whose primary value comes from
its ability to provide a necessary service to the state of
nature. It is important to note that Wilbur does not deny
the ugliness of the bird in the course of the poem. The
vulture is definitely an ugly creature except when seen from
a distance. While ugly, the vulture is vital to the
ecosystem; it provides an oppressive but necessary opposing
pole to the powerful splendor of beautiful trees and dancing
girls. Ultimately, both poles—that of beauty and that of
ugliness—are necessary to produce an interstice of cosmic
order which produce sensory pleasure and life.

"Children of Darkness" is another one of Wilbur's poems
that stresses the necessity of the ugly by defending fungi
of the most hideous sorts. Michelson notes that "the beauty
in all this horror is that these [fungi] break death down so
that life can rise again; they keep nature new and fresh,
and a steady serious look at them can do the same for us" (767). Michelson's comments are also apropos of the grotesque vultures in "Still, Citizen Sparrow." Like the unappealing vultures, the types of fungi that are ugly are also useful, and Wilbur resists the common folklore surrounding fungi which calls them evil. Wilbur footnotes the poem, noting that "Fungi . . . were early associated with darkness, snakepits, witches, deaths and evil in general. The Fly Alaric was said, in folklore, to grow from the bloody slaver of Wotan's horse, pursued by devils" (112). According to one Mycologist, ordinary fungi over the centuries "in general have been regarded with . . . an antipathy so strong that it has been woven into our folktales, and finds expression in the pages of our writers, both of prose and poem" (Rolfe 6). Wilbur asks in "Children of Darkness" whether "we may not after all" forget myths surrounding the fungi such as "the Norse / Drivel of Wotan's panicked horse, / And every rumor bred by forest fear?" (ll. 24-26). The allusion is to the Teutonic god Wotan who is one of the triad of Norse deities (Wedeck 246-247). The fungi are not as they have been seen in other stories from folklore, Wilbur goes on to say, "adders," "devil's food," "minced witches," or the "fare of hell" (28, 29, 33). Rather some of the fungi (like the vultures) have a beautiful side: "Light strikes into a gloom in which are found / Red disc, grey mist, / Cold-auburn firfoot,
amethyst" (40-42). The extreme beauty and usefulness of the fungi are fused in the line "Nowhere does water stand so clear / As in stalked cups where a pine has come to grief" (31). Fungi, which are occasionally beautiful, flourish only near death.

The opening stanzas of the poem are shocking in their gruesome detail and describe the types of fungi that Wilbur uses as a pole of ugliness:

If groves are choirs and sanctuaried fanes,
What have we here?
An elm-bole cocks a bloody ear;
In the oak's shadow lies a strew of brains
Wherever, after the deep rains,

The woodlands are morose and reek of punk
These gobbets grow—
Tongue, lobe, hand, hoof or butchered toe
Amassing on the fallen branch, half-sunk
In leaf mold, or the riddled trunk. (ll. 1-10)

Robert Shaw notes that the poem's "broader concern is with the question why things which seem ugly and maleficent are suffered by the creator to exist" (110). In Wilbur's creation, the ugly must exist on the opposite pole as beauty in order to create an interstice out of which order can be revealed. Although many fungi are beautiful, Wilbur here mentions many which are not: the examples in the first ten
lines are hideous because they resemble dismembered body parts. Ugly as these particular fungi are, they serve a vital role in nature as the mycologist, Lilian Hawker, notes:

Fungi are important, particularly in acid soils where bacterial activity is at a minimum, in breaking down the cellulose and lignin in plant remains, a first step in humus formation and essential for maintenance of soil fertility. Without this activity, shared by bacteria in most soils, the growth of green plants, and consequently of animals would cease (17).

Wilbur seems aware of the fungi's essential service in breaking down dead vegetation just as he seems aware of the vulture's necessity in "Still, Citizen Sparrow" to "mock mutability" by eating the remains of dead animals.

Ironically, though the fungi enable nature to replenish itself, Wilbur notes that the fungi themselves do not replenish themselves like the life they serve:

Their gift is not for life, these creatures who
Disdain to root
Will bear no stem or leaf, no fruit,
And, mimicking the forms which they eschew,
Make it their pleasure to undo

All that has heart and fiber. Yet of course
What these break down
Wells up refreshed in branch and crown.

(11. 16-23)

Fungi do not reproduce in the same way as the surrounding plant life; they are asexual. The forms they grow into "mimic" reality, but part of the horror of the fungi comes in the distortion of reality their mimicking brings. They mimic amputated parts of animals—"tongue, lobe, hand, hoof"—but also the more significant reproductive capability of animal life, the "shameless phalloi" of line fourteen. The growth of the fungi is made ironic by the fact that while they live to destroy form (dead matter in the soil)—"All that has heart and fiber"—they provide the soil conditions in which beautiful forms can grow. In other words, the beautiful in nature often depend upon the humble and ugly types of fungi for their existence. The reverse is also of course true; the ugly fungi depend on the beautiful trees and other plant life to provide them with food. The beautiful and the ugly are thrust together and out of the interstice comes a complex order.

Wilbur ends the poem by noting that "Gargoyles is what they are at worst" (1. 41). His use of gargoyles reinforces his emphasis on these fungi as unattractive and even monstrous. Yet paradoxically, like gargoyles, the fungi can also be awe inspiring. They are also useful like the gargoyles which carry rainwater clear of buildings, a
necessary if somewhat lowly function parallel to the fungi’s
deterioration of dead matter.

The end of the poem notes that even if the fungi "preen
themselves" or pretend to be "demons, ghouls or elves, the
holy chiaroscuro of the woods / Still would embrace them.
They are good" (l. 41-45). By prefacing the word
"chiaroscuro" with "holy," Wilbur is able to imply that the
fungi—and, by extension, all nature—are sanctified and
unified works of art that use both the contrasting woods
(that are pleasing to look at) and the lowly fungi (that are
sometimes not) to create an a chiaroscuro—an artistic
technique that contrasts light and dark elements of nature.
"Chiaroscuro" is an important word in the poem and places it
firmly in the context of Wilbur’s other interstitial poetry
because Wilbur in this poem is himself using a chiaroscuro
or interstice between light and dark, ugliness and beauty.
The fungi provide the pole of ugliness, and the woods
provide the pole of beauty which when pressed together form
an interstice.

The concluding sentence of the poem, "They are good,"
echoes the language used in Genesis to express God’s
approval in the creation: "God saw all that he had made and
it was very good." (N.I.V. 1:31). Wilbur includes the fungi
in his interstitial poetic world where they become a part of
the creation in which a "holy chiarascuro" is used, and
which is declared by the author/creator to be valuable. As
Shaw notes, "These seemingly alien beings are perceived as occupying a fit place in the divine economy" (110).

When I asked Wilbur during a 1990 interview if he thought there was a connection between "Children of Darkness" and "Still, Citizen Sparrow" he gave the following response:

   It's funny how slow one is to codify one's own work. I don't think that I have ever thought of those two poems, the mushroom poem and the vulture poem, in a bracketed way. But when you mention that, it's quite true; it's quite true. I'm saying that the mushrooms after all are good, and the vulture after all is good. Maybe if I'd been aware of the vulture poem when I was writing the mushroom poem, it would have given me trouble and made me feel that I was in some degree repeating an argument.

Of course, the two poems do repeat an argument, one that is common throughout Wilbur's work. Over and over, he brings together poles in order to create interstices out of which his sense of order and goodness comes.

This same strong sense of order also exists within that part of nature that humanity controls. In "Junk" Wilbur creates an interstice between objects of natural beauty and ugly objects of craft; he laments sloppy craftsmanship and wastefulness, but at the same time realizes that the natural elements which make up the craft will be set free by the
power of natural laws such as decay.

"Junk" is written in Old English alliterative verse form which produces a rough but patterned rhythm and emphasizes the content of the poem. The broken lines and harsh alliterative words reflect the trash pile that the poems opening lines describe:

An axe angles
from my neighbor’s ashcan
It is hell’s handiwork,
the wood not hickory
The flow of the grain
not faithfully followed.
The shivered shaft
rises from a shellheap
Of plastic playthings,
paper plates,
And the sheer shards
of shattered tumblers
That were not annealed
for the time needful.
At the same curbside,
a cast--off cabinet
Of wavily warped
unseasoned wood
Waits to be trundled
in the trash-man's truck
(11. 1-10)

The speaker calls the axe in the first line "hell's handiwork," which possibly (since Satan is traditionally held responsible for destroying the prelapsarian innocence and beauty of Eden) indicates that something naturally beautiful has been grossly distorted. The axe handle "is not hickory," which is commonly used in axe handles and other objects that require great strength from the wood. Not only is the axe handle composed of wood that does not meet the proper specifications for a good axe, it is also badly carved—"The flow of the grain not faithfully followed" (1. 3). Consequently, the axe handle has broken, becoming only a "shivered shaft."

Likewise, the tumblers in line six were not "annealed for the time needful." Annealing is a process of heating and cooling which tempers glass or metal making it harder to break. The annealing process was not carried out on the tumblers and so they have become "sheer shards."

Furthermore, the "cast-off cabinet" also lacks proper craftsmanship--the wood is "unseasoned" and so waits to be hauled off and hidden. All of these distorted objects represent the waste and destruction that cheap work brings about.

The early tone of the poem is somewhat sorrowful over this waste and unnecessary ugliness involved in the
production of substandard objects. The poem also derides the builders and craftspeople who are responsible for creating junk in order to make a few paltry dollars; they have sold the beauty of the natural world for material gain:

The heart winces

For junk and gimcrack

for jerrybuilt things

And the men who make them

for a little money,

Bartering pride

like the bought boxer

Who pulls his punches

or the paid off jockey

Who in the home stretch

holds in his horse.

(ll. 11-16)

Unlike the vulture and the fungi which exist in an ugly state to serve nature, these crafters of ugliness and distorters of beauty rape and attempt to control nature.

"Junk" is kept from becoming a bitter poem by the tonal change from line seventeen onward. Instead of leaving the cheap crafters in control, the speaker rejoices because the physical objects that they have made ugly have not been cheapened by their misuse:

Yet the things themselves

in thoughtless honor
Have kept composure,
like captives who would not
Talk under torture. (ll. 17-19)
The true nature of the objects is imprisoned and hidden inside the piece of craft they are used for. Their "thoughtless honor" directly contrasts the bartered pride of the boxer pulling his punches; ironically it is the nonsentient objects in nature which display the ideal of nobility in their resistance to attempts to steal their native beauty.

Wilbur's insight that the natural beauty of the world rises above the cheapness and squalor imposed upon it by cheap craftspeople echoes Hopkin's poem "God's Grandeur" where Hopkins notes that though the natural world is constantly distorted by the frenzied exertions of tradespeople, it is never ruined beyond all hope:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There live the dearest freshness deep down things . . . (ll. 5-10)
Even though the junk in Wilbur’s poem is soiled with the cheap craft imposed upon it, it will be set free once it is thrown into the trash dump.

It is important at this point to stress that although the natural objects used to create cheap and ugly craftwork are powerless to resist the craftsman, they have an innate dignity that is restored by the various processes of nature:

Tossed from a tailgate

Where the dump displays

its random dolmans,

Its black barrows

and blazing valleys

They shall waste in the weather

toward what they were.

The sun shall glory

in the glitter of glass-chips,

Foreseeing the salvage

of the prisoned sand,

And the blistering paint

peel off in patches,

That the good grain

be discovered again.

(ll. 19-26)

Once inside the trash dump, the unsightly junk is free to return to its elemental state and thus regain its native beauty. The transformation from ugly junk back to natural
objects is reflected by the change in tone at this point in the poem: the junk is handled for the last time by the trash haulers who carelessly "toss" the junk from the tailgate of the truck.

The careless tone gives way to a dignified tone after the final insult, as the natural objects and materials that make up the junk join the dumps display of "random dolmens" and "black barrows." The dolmens and barrows, both prehistoric tombs, serve to dignify the junk because the tomb imagery suggests the possibility of redemption and resurrection. The idea of resurrection is reflected in the natural process of deterioration which will slowly break the junk down to its elemental components which can become beautiful objects of nature again:

Then burnt, bulldozed,

they shall all be buried

To the depth of diamonds,

in the making dark.

(11. 27-28)

These lines suggest the possibility of redemption because diamonds are made over a long period of time by the compression of coal, and by comparing the decomposing process of junk with the creation of diamonds, Wilbur is able to confer a high value to the junk and demonstrate order within chaos. The compression of the diamonds here also echoes the making of the solitaires in "Orchard Trees,
January" discussed above where suffering leads to rebirth.

Suddenly, however, the speaker at this point turns away from the half-expected Christian notion of redemption and chooses instead two characters from pagan mythology by envisioning the junk in a region

Where halt Hephaestus

keeps his hammer

And Wayland’s work is worn away. (ll. 29-30)

Hephaestus and Wayland are legendary smiths who possibly represent the forces of nature which take the junk and break it down to basic elements and remake it into something of value and beauty. Thus Wilbur creates a contrast between the mythical smiths and the careless, cheap craftsmen and by extension human power and the power of the non-human natural world.

This reading of the last lines of the poem seem fairly straightforward, and at least two critics have noted Wilbur’s effort to redeem the junk from the grasp of cheap craftsmen. Donald Hill and Kenneth Johnson both note the redemption hinted at in the poem, but both miss the significance of the last line. Donald Hill notes the importance of the distinction between cheap and proud craftsmanship as well as the possibility of the junk’s redemption:

The reference to Hephaestus carries us beyond the thought of the impersonal and protracted work of
chemical forces that turn the separate objects into undifferentiated soil; it reminds us of the splendid craft and fury of the god who made gifts for his wife Aphrodite and the armor for Achilles. The junk is not past the chance of redemption and glory; it may yet become the substance of some well-made object. (146)

Hill praises the poem because he likes the idea that the junk can still be salvaged. Kenneth Johnson, on the other hand, takes issue with "Junk" (and with Wilbur’s poetry in general) because he believes that Wilbur is too quick to take the junk to the dump and have it redeemed. Johnson uses "Junk" as an opportunity to criticize what he perceives as Wilbur’s rejection of the material world:

The tangible world seems to be something that Wilbur celebrates only when it is immediately attractive. When the scene is unattractive, Wilbur almost always quickly retreats from it in one way or another. For instance, in "Junk" he gains an all-too-quick comfort from the fact that a pile of junk can in the hands of a 'Hephaestus' be re-used—(why can’t he accept junk as junk?). (213)

While I agree in part with Hill’s comment about the role that elemental forces serve in breaking down the junk, I disagree completely with Johnson, especially his assertion
that Wilbur doesn't celebrate the tangible world. Both critics overlook the key last line, which indicates Wilbur's basic assumption that the natural world is intrinsically good and orderly. Not only does poor work deteriorate but even the legendary work of Wayland "is worn away." Wilbur thus troubles the notion of redemption that he introduces with "dolmens and barrows" in order to convey one of the beliefs most basic to his work: the innate value and order of the cosmos. Hill's comment that the junk is "not past the chance of redemption" misses the poem's implication that all of the natural objects are already good and need not be redeemed. The "redemption" offered even by good craftsmanship will be outlived by the solid beauty and "freshness deep down" that the physical world possesses.

An obvious connection exists between "Junk," "Still, Citizen Sparrow," "Children of Darkness" and "The Eye," discussed in chapter two. Only with the "corrected vision" Wilbur mentions in "The Eye" can observers see and value the beauty and usefulness of vultures, fungi, junk and the "blind young woman" and "legless man." Wilbur creates this "corrected vision" by evoking the interstice between beauty and ugliness, which leads to the sense of order that Wilbur so often insists upon. This sense of order includes both physical and spiritual worlds and comes from Wilbur's basically religious worldview, based on the assumption that God as the creator of nature exists and has a purpose for
everything in nature, even those objects which, at first glance, are repellent. A large part of Wilbur's poetry causes readers to take a second and even third long look into ugliness and beauty and come away with an interstitially-colored vision to apply to all they see. If this were all that Wilbur's poetry did, it would be powerful but not as compelling as it actually is. Instead, Wilbur clouds the pure corrected vision he creates in the poetry discussed and creates a more complex, more troubled vision.
CHAPTER V

"THE VANISHED GROUND"

In the four preceding chapters I have examined poems in which, for the most part, Wilbur employs interstices in order to create and affirm various propositions such as the interdependence of spiritual and physical realities, the necessity of beauty and ugliness to cosmic order, and the interconnectedness of life and death. Throughout his Collected Poems, however, occasionally, individual poems trouble the orderly world that Wilbur creates and supports in the majority of his poems. On one side stand a multitude of poems that are full of confident faith in a basic order and goodness in the universe; on the other side stand a few poems scattered throughout his work, which seem to indicate wavering faith in the general vision. They provoke the dark idea that either no meaning or order exists apart from the perceiver or that any meaning lies necessarily beyond the perceiver's grasp.

In this final chapter I would like to examine some specific poems that trouble the orderly world Wilbur articulates in the majority of his poetry. The existence of these poems throughout Wilbur's work suggests that Wilbur not only uses interstices within his poetry but also between
his poems. Wilbur’s poetic territory exists between faithful and doubtful poems in his work which lead finally to a paradoxical but powerful fusion of skepticism and belief. This interstice reveals a vision of a universe in which a cosmic order exists, but must be approached by those who rely on faith in intuition and physical senses even in the midst of doubt in the possibility of apprehending reality beyond the self. Thus, Wilbur reveals the reality and power of both faith and doubt and establishes their dependence upon one another. Behind the profusion of joy in Wilbur’s more hopeful poems lurks the sure knowledge that fear and doubt are also real, and the revelation that joy is necessarily bound up with the pain of uncertainty.

The pain and fear inherent in wrestling revelation out of the apparent world is perhaps nowhere clearer in Wilbur’s work than in the poem "In the Field" (Walking to Sleep, 1969). This poem troubles many of the other Wilbur poems where knowledge of a spiritual world seems certain by examining the smallness of humanity compared to the rest of the universe. Instead of using a matter/spirit interstice to reach a moment of revelation, the speaker sets up poles of light and dark to create an interstice that reveals the fragile, uncertain nature of human existence.

The initial setting of the poem is a lonely field at night in which the speaker remembers walking with a friend, looking at the stars, and talking about the mythology of the
constellations. The first two stanzas of the poem establish the surety of the stars' motion and the blurry perceptions of the observers—the two poles of the interstice that begins the poem:

This field-grass brushed our legs
Last night, when out we stumbled looking up,
Wading as through the cloudy dregs
Of a wide, sparkling cup,

Our thrown-back heads aswim
In the grand, kept appointments of the air,
Save where a pine at the sky's rim
Took something from the Bear. (11. 1-8)

The speaker's perspective and perceptions are necessarily at the bottom of the cup of the sky—"dregs" communicates not only the murky impediments to the speaker's vision but also the bitterness and pain that wait for the speaker by the end of the poem after he has finished looking at the sky. The tree that "takes something" from the bear constellation is part of these dregs, hindering clear perception. The sky, on the other hand, seems certain, returning night after night apparently unchanged.

After discussing the mythology behind the constellations in the next two stanzas, the speaker and his friend turn to science, realizing that the shapes that seemed so certain to the ancients have in fact changed
slowly into other shapes as the view from the earth changes because of the precession of the equinoxes. The speaker becomes aware suddenly of the falsehood of the mythology and the uncertainty of the stars:

But none of that was true.
What shapes that Greece or Babylon discerned
Had time not slowly drawn askew
Or like cat's cradles turned?

And did we not recall
That Egypt's north was in the Dragon's tail?
As if a form of type should fall
And dash itself like hail,

The heavens jumped away,
Bursting the cincture of the zodiac,
Shot flairs with nothing left to say
To us, not coming back

Unless they should at last,
Like hard-flung dice that ramble out the throw,
Be gathered for another cast. (ll. 17-31)

The speaker realizes that the stories upon which the ancient civilizations based their religions were subject to the physical motions of the Earth. The tone—one of sadness—is introduced by the comparison of the receding stars of the
expanding universe with signal flares that communicate nothing; just as the flairs vanish when once fired off, the stars can never return to where they were when the myths were first invented. The melancholic tone is also emphasized by "cast" which has the dual meaning of a random throw but also the new set of people or performers (constellations) that will walk across the stage of the earth's sky after the speaker is gone. This tone continues to inform the poem and is directly acknowledged by the speaker in the last line.

The sudden fear caused by the motion of the apparently fixed stars causes the speaker and his friend to turn to discussing astronomy in mathematical terms, a conversation which the speaker hopefully says "trued / Our talk awhile to words of the real sky." (ll. 36-37). The "truth" that this discussion reveals leads to an even more fear-inspiring awareness of the smallness of the earth and the existence of individuals. This awareness "brings the nip of fear" and leaves a gulf blown open by the "grenade" of their awareness that the end of the universe will extinguish worlds and unmake light (ll. 41-48). Having looked at the sky in a variety of ways and found none reassuring, the speaker and his friend retire back to the safety of their cabin.

The major interstice in the poem is introduced in the transition to the last seven stanzas where we are made aware that the speaker has been remembering the night before in
the dark field; he looks now on that same field in bright sunshine. Ironically, the revelation of the uncertain end of the universe and the smallness of the individual is swallowed in the sudden clarity of the bright sun and blue sky:

Today, in the same field,
The sun takes all, and what could lie beyond?
Those holes in heaven have been sealed
Like rain-drills in a pond,

And we, beheld in gold,
See nothing starry but these galaxies
Of flowers, dense and manifold,
Which lift about our knees (ll. 53-60)

The sunshine offers an opposite pole to the darkness, and out of the ensuing interstice comes the revelation of the last difficult stanzas. The sun "takes all," much as the tree "took something from" the bear constellation earlier in the poem. Ironically, it is not a physical object blocking vision; now the overwhelming presence of too much light seals the stars away from the perceiver and replaces them with an earth-level vision of flowers, unseen in the darkness the night before.

From the interstice created between the light and darkness--certain perception and uncertain knowledge--comes the certainty of the speaker’s statement contained in the
last three stanzas:

We could no doubt mistake
These flowers for some answer to that fright
We felt for all creation's sake
In our dark talk last night,

Taking to heart what came
Of the heart's wish for life, which, staking here
In the least field an endless claim,
Beats on from sphere to sphere

And pounds beyond the sun,
Where nothing less peremptory can go,
And is ourselves, and is the one
Unbounded thing we know. (ll. 69-80)

Finally, what escapes from the interstice between the terrifyingly distant stars moving across the night sky and the blinding beauty of the day is the individual's wish for life--the only unbounded thing, the speaker says, we can know. The speaker is careful to say "unbounded" because he is aware after the night's discussion that the universe, as vast as it is, has limits both in time and space. The individual's heartbeat and desire for life are all that are "peremptory" enough to go beyond the finite realm of the physical world. "Peremptory" is vital to what is expressed in the interstice because it conveys the imperative and
urgent nature of self awareness as well as saying that the desire for life puts an end to all argument or contradiction brought about by the vastness of the universe and the smallness of humanity.

"Into the Field" is troubling because the last stanza borders on a forced resolution of the conflict that the rest of the poem raises; yet surely for the speaker to have mistaken the beauty of the day as "an answer" to the fright he felt in the darkness of the night before would be even more troubling. Instead of providing solace by seeing a bright morning after the fear of the night, the speaker seeks to acknowledge the darkness that comes from those moments when a cocky "knowing" gives way to a fragile believing.

Another poem which provides a pole of doubt in Wilbur's work is "The Terrace" (Ceremony and Other Poems 1950) where the speaker spends much of the poem capturing the sensual details of a picnic. Initially, the details of the picnic sound pleasant enough:

We ate with steeps of sky about our shoulders,
High up a mountainside,
On a terrace like a raft roving
Seas of view.

The tablecloth was green, and blurred away
Toward verdure far and wide,
And all the country came to be
Our table too. (ll. 1-8)

At this point in the poem, the speaker rather pompously begins describing the fare of the picnic, which is the surrounding landscape itself. The speaker and his companions become powerful partakers of the beauty they survey, reflected in the next several stanzas especially in the sense of taste. The speaker and his friends "tilted glasses of rose / From tinted peaks of snow (ll. 9-10) and the water washing over the hands of women washing clothes in a nearby stream becomes a "sauce rare" (l. 16). The towns below look like "the finest cheese" and the towns' towers offer "enormous melons" (ll. 18-19). The picnickers hear all day the "spice / Of many tangy bees / Eddying through the miles-deep / Salad of flowers" (ll. 21-22). To top off this meal of sights and sounds the group dips their "cups in light" (l. 24) and catch "the fine-spun shade of clouds / In spoon and plate" (ll. 25-26). All during this figurative feast, the people seem in control of the nature they partake in; yet, the speaker must admit that they are helpless in the face of night.

The first eight stanzas of the poem are lighthearted and fanciful, but the last four reflect a doubt in all that is experienced as well as in the self:

But for all our benedictions and our gay
Readily said graces,
The evening stole our provender and
Left us there,

And darkness filled the specious space, and fell
Betwixt our silent faces,
Pressing against our eyes its absent
Fathomless stare.

Out in the dark we felt the real mountains
Hulking in proper might,
And we felt the edge of the black wind's
Regardless cleave,

And we knew we had eaten not the manna of heaven
But our own reflected light,
And we were the only part of the night that we
Couldn't believe. (ll. 33-48)

Again, just as in "Out in the Field," the major interstice
of this poem is between light and darkness. The order of
occurrence is reversed, however, and instead of departing
the poem on a note of faith in the self and its perceptions,
the speaker negates the first eight stanzas with a powerful
statement of disbelief in the self and in those connections
in nature that the self projects. Thus the speaker moves
from an inflated sense of self importance to a shrunken
solipsism and finally to a gesture toward nihilism.
Wilbur uses several key words and phrases in the last four stanzas that lead up to the sorrowful statement of disbelief in the last two lines. "Specious" conveys the attractive deception of a belief in the organization of nature that the senses create in the first eight stanzas; believing that the beautiful surroundings of the picnic actually exist and are "eaten" or partaken as beauty is false, the speaker implies. Instead, that belief in the pleasures of the picnic rely on the faulty perceptions of the individuals in the group.

The "absent, fathomless stare" of the night reflects the persistence of the speaker in projecting a persona on nature. The speaker desires to somehow find sense in the basic chaos of the night, but this sort of organization is not inherent in the universe; it too relies on the perceiver. This realization is "pressed" against the speaker in lieu of what is desired, a sense of inherent meaning. The night depends on the speaker for the sensation of deepness and weight. The beauty that the picnickers partake in is of their own devising and comes from a reflection or projection of their sense of wonder and meaning on to the exterior world. The poem ends sadly since the speaker moves from the solipsistic realization that only he (and perhaps his friends) exist to a stance of non-belief in anything including the self.

"A Chronic Condition" (Things of This World 1956) is
more playful than the two preceding poems we have examined, but it still deals with the problems of belief and doubt in a world where material reality is called into question:

Berkeley did not foresee such misty weather,
Nor centuries of light
Intend so dim a day. Swaddled together
In separateness, the trees
Persist or not beyond the gray-white
Palings of the air. Gone
Are whatever wings bothered the lighted leaves
When leaves there were. Are all
The sparrows fallen? I can hardly hear
My memory of those bees
Which only lately mesmerized the lawn.
Now, something, blaze! A fear
Swaddles me now that Hylas’ tree will fall
Where no eye lights and grieves,
Will fall to nothing and without a sound.

I sway and lean above the vanished ground. (ll. 1-16)

This poem seems simple on an initial first reading, but it requires that the reader be aware of Berkeley’s and Aristotle’s philosophies. The poem is an intricate play between a natural occurrence (woods in a heavy fog) and Berkeley’s belief that to be is perceive and to be
perceived—material objects are only ideas in the mind of the perceiver with no independent existence, and all of reality is an idea in the mind of God.

When the fog obscures the trees, the speaker fears they may blink out of existence. The natural objects that recently surrounded the speaker are gone (probably because it is winter) and the speaker is alone desiring any kind of sensation to validate his existence. The sudden fear of the speaker perhaps reflects the notion that God has started thinking about something else, and the woods and perhaps the speaker will now vanish. "Hylas" is a clever word play meaning both in Greek "wood" and "substance." In fact "Hylas" is a variant spelling of hyle—the material stuff out of which the universe is made according to Aristotle. Thus the speaker is afraid not only for the woods that he hopes are around him in the fog, but also for the very matter of the earth and himself.

Lines thirteen and fourteen play off the old philosophical question "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" The speaker and the philosophical tree are linked by the speaker’s fear, which reflects his belief in a Berkeleyan universe where individuals have no existence apart from the mind of God and when he ceases to think about the individual, the individual ceases to exist. The repetition of "Swaddle" in lines three and thirteen supports the speaker’s connection to the trees
that surround him in the fog as well as the philosophical tree; the linkage is completed when the speaker "sways and leans" over the ground that has vanished, and the poem ends on an uncertain note. The poem also slyly calls into question the existence of the poem apart from the reader. By leaving the speaker in a jeopardized state of borderline existence at its end, the poem begs the reader to ask whether the speaker and the poem persist after the reader turns the page.

In the same way that Wilbur troubles his ideas about reality apart from a perceiver, he also provides an opposite pole from his mainline ideas about death. In "The Mill" (Things of This World 1956) and "The Lilacs" (Walking to Sleep—New Poems and Translations 1969) Wilbur examines the power of death and the fragility of the individual and offers no hope beyond the grave. These "doubting" poems are the other side of the more hopeful poems examined in chapter three and help create the major interstice between doubt and faith in Wilbur's canon.

"The Lilacs" like "Junk" is written old English alliterative verse primarily, it seems, in order the represent in verse form the way the lilacs look:

Those laden lilacs
at the lawn's end
Came stark, spindly,
and in staggered file,
Like walking wounded
from the dead of winter.
(ll. 1-3)

Just like the ragged verse form, the lilacs also are "spindly" and "in staggered file." "Lilacs" provides the opposite pole for poems like "Orchard Trees, January" where the speaker points out the value of suffering in producing beauty. The lilacs are also beautiful, but the poem focuses on their death and pain rather than the beauty which that pain produces.

As the lilacs waken from the winter "the memory swept them / of night and numbness and the taste of nothing" (ll. 6-7). The "nothing" that is evoked here becomes a palpable something reminiscent of the "nothing" in Wallace Stevens "Snow Man." Instead of a lack, the nothing represents a fullness that is palpable enough to have a name and cause the lilacs to grow "green and grateful" (l. 12).

At first glance, the poem may seem to echo the sentiments of "Orchard Trees, January" where the cold, awful winter produces the flowers of spring in the trees. In "Orchard Trees, January," however, Wilbur is celebrating nature and the rebirth of spring; in "The Lilacs" Wilbur notes the renewal of spring in passing and the poem ends on a dark note that provides an opposing pole of doubt to the optimism in "Orchard Trees, January":

These lacquered leaves
where the light paddles
And the big blooms
buzzing among them
Have kept their counsel,
conveying nothing
Of their mortal message,
unless one should measure
The depth and dumbness
of death's kingdom
By the pure power
of this perfume.

(11. 14-19)

Wilbur perhaps echoes the desolation and acridness of the
world of Eliot's "Hollow Men" by using the phrase "death's
kingdom," which speaks of the incredible and overwhelming
power of death; however, "death's kingdom" also reinforces
the fullness and power of the memory of "nothing" to which
the lilacs awaken. Thus, instead of rejoicing in the beauty
of the lilacs, the speaker suffers the frightening
realization that their beauty comes from death and that
ultimately death and nothingness are more real and powerful
than life.

In the same way the speaker in "The Lilacs" says that
the beauty of the lilacs conveys no message beyond a vague
incomprehensible power of death, "Clearness" (Ceremony and
Other Poems 1950) also stresses the weakness of the
individual and the difficulty in perceiving any sort of "message" from nature.

The speaker begins the poem by noting the beauty of the natural world and particularly in those things that are clear like the "stare of a deer" or the "ring of a hammer" or a bucket of "perfectly lucid water" (ll. 1-2). The speaker in this poem is alien to the speaker in "The Eye" where a corrected vision is called for and acquired. There is a direct connection, however, between "Clearness" and "Out in the Field" discussed above where vision is obscured temporarily by the murky atmosphere and trees but paradoxically gives way to a type of clarity that further obscures vision. Both poems present a pole of doubt in perception and reason and so stand against "The Eye" in order to create the interstice between doubt and faith.

In "Clearness" the problem is not primarily in the eyes of the speaker, who sees nature clearly, but in the speaker's ability to witness any meaning in what he sees and achieve a "corrected vision" wherein he can understand and value what he sees. The irony in "Clearness" is that the speaker sees "through" what he looks at and has an incomprehensible vision—he has, just as the speaker in "Out in the Field," too much light, and it hides meaning from him. In the vision he sees a "fabulous town / Immaculate, high, and never found before" (ll. 15-16). Initially the speaker is excited by the vision for it is a perfect place
from whence truth abounds:

This was the town of my mind's exacted vision
Where truths fell from the bells like a jackpot of dimes,
And the people's voices, carrying over the water,
Sang in the ear as clear and sweet as birds.

(11. 17-20)

The speaker is initially excited about the vision because he believes it to contain some sort of truth. The vision, however, has two problems: it is the product of the speaker's mind (not a self-existent place where independent "truth" exists) and, as the speaker goes on to say, the ultimate meaning of the vision eludes him:

But this was Thule of the mind's worst vanity;
Nor could I tell the burden of those clear chimes;
And the fog fell, and the stainless voices faded;
I had not understood their lovely words.

(11. 21-24)

Just as Thule was once considered to be the extreme northern limit of the world, so also the speaker's vision is also the extreme limit of "vanity." The vision is merely created in his mind; he does not tap into some unfound world or truth. The speaker thus seems to indicate that the individual is separated two-fold from the objective world: he cannot truly move beyond his own perceptions which stand between him and the objective world, and even if he could have a vision that
somehow took him beyond the realm of mind, the poem implies that he would not grasp any truth in the world beyond because it can only be enjoyed and not understood.

Wilbur raises the same question about objective reality beyond the individual in "The Mill," a poem in which the speaker puzzles over the death of a friend and the loss of his accumulated memory. "The Mill" begins with the speaker examining his friend's final moments as he went back over his life remembering minutia:

The spoiling daylight inched along the bar-top
Orange and cloudy, slowly igniting lint,
And then that glow was gone, and still your voice,
Serene with failure and with the ease of dying,
Rose from the shades that more and more became you.
Turning among its images, your mind
Produced the names of streets, the exact look
Of lilacs, 1903, in Cincinnati,
--Random, as if your testament were made,
The round sums all bestowed, and now you spent Your pocket change, so as to be rid of it.
Or was it that you half-hoped to surprise Your dead life's sound and sovereign anecdote?
(ll. 1-13)
The speaker is not sure whether his friend is randomly
emptying the contents of his mind or is purposefully looking for some memory that will give meaning to his whole life. The speaker seizes one particular image out of the profusion offered by his friend and by remembering it for his friend offers him a type of immortality. It is not the hint of immortality offered in Wilbur’s other elegiac poems; rather it provides yet another pole of doubt and confusion to stand opposite the pole of faith and order in other poems.

The memory that the speaker takes away from his last encounter with his friend is of a mill wheel. The speaker describes the wheel in great detail but is unable to place it clearly in time or space:

What I remember best is the wrecked mill
You stumbled on in Tennessee; or was it
Somewhere down in Brazil? It slips my mind
Already. But there it was in a still valley
Far from the towns. No road or path came near it.
If there had been a clearing now it was gone,
And all you found amidst the choke of green
Was three walls standing, hurdled by great vines
And thatched by height on height of hushing leaves.
But still the mill-wheel turned! its crazy buckets
Creaking and lumbering out of the clogged race
And sounding, as you said, as if you’d found
Time all alone and talking to himself
In his eternal rattle. (11. 14-27)
The poem calls into question the possibility of expressing to others what is seen and heard. The remembered mill (twice removed from the actual mill) is not "real," and yet it has a profound effect on the speaker. In the same way that the speaker in "Clearness" is left bewildered after his vision so also the speaker cannot make sense of his memory of a memory. It is beautiful, but does it express any sort of truth beyond its mere existence?

Bruce Michelson discusses "The Mill" at length in his recent book and points out that more is going on in this poem than the individual seeking meaning; it also points to the poet's difficulty in expressing "powerful intuitions, epiphanies which cannot finally be sounded, tested, or satisfactorily explained. . . . they seem to mean something, and if one tries to pass them along, they go forth robbed of their glow, spoiled" (7). I believe that Wilbur is not only indicating the loss of meaning in communication between people, but also the difficulty in understanding anything that come to the self from the exterior world.

In the last six lines of the poem, the speaker sums up the difficulty that all individuals face after an experience (either actual or imagined). The memory exists within the individual, but the memory is not the "real" experience. The individual perforce must fit the experience within the context of the mind and in this process much is lost:
How should I guess
Where they are gone to, now that you are gone,
Those fading streets and those most fragile lilacs,
Those fragmentary views, those times of day?
All that I can be sure of is the mill-wheel.
It turns and turns in my mind, over and over.
(ll. 28-33)

The process of communication between the speaker and his friend and the poem and the reader is similar. The speaker never sees the mill but only imagines what it must look like. In the same way, the reader of the poem is forced to visualize a memory of a memory and try to make something of it. By the end of the poem both speaker and reader share the basic concept of an ever-turning mill wheel, but everyone's mill wheel is individualized since the actual memory dies with the speaker's friend. The speaker exits the poem with only one memory he is sure of and that is a construct of his own mind and imagination.

"The Beacon" (Things of this World 1956) like "The Mill" looks at a dominant repetitive image and wrestles with the problems of faith and doubt in a world or reality beyond the individual. The poem is made complex by the troubling of the "meaning" that a reader might take from an surface reading of it. Faith and doubt are again set in poles in the guise of light and dark in much the same way as in the
poems already examined in this chapter, but the poem twists and turns the possibility of meaning beyond the individual repeatedly. The dominant image that reflects the turning is the beacon of the title; like the mill wheel it revolves "over and over" (l. 3). The repetitive turning of both beacon and mill wheel suggests the mind of the individual turning over the question whether the world exterior to the individual exists and, if so, if there is meaning inherent in that existence.

"The Beacon" is set on a lonely, rocky shore at night, and the speaker begins the poem by setting the lighthouse and the ocean against each other. Bruce Michelson and Donald Hill discuss "The Beacon" at length, but both, I believe, miss a critical point about the poem. Michelson believes the poem puts forth the idea that "the absolute is not absent, but merely 'veiled' beneath a disordered surface" (71). He goes on to say that the poem stresses great faith in the power of imagination. Likewise, Donald Hill says that "The Beacon" demonstrates "faith in the power of our minds and of our creative talents" (115). Both critics miss the tone of the first stanza which seems to me to be at least somewhat self deprecating:

Founded on rock and facing the night-fouled sea
A beacon blinks at its own brilliance,
Over and over with cutlass gaze
Solving the Gordian waters,
Making the sea roads out, and the lounge of the weedy
Meadows, finding the blown hair
As it always has, and the buxom, lavish
Romp of the ocean-daughters. (11. 1-8)

By securing the beacon firmly to rock, the speaker (almost desperately) insists on the strength and lasting value of individual perceptions and the ability of the individual to create structures that oppose the exterior world; however, Wilbur perhaps undercuts the speaker’s voice by his choice of words. "Founded" can mean to establish, but it can also mean to pour into a mold. Thus, Wilbur troubles the notion that the individual is powerful enough to independently create lasting structure without relying on something already existing. The dangers of building an organizing principle on the perceived reality of the exterior world is hinted at by the closeness of "founded on rock" to "founded on rock." To found is to build and to founder is to be destroyed; Wilbur thus suggests that there is a dangerous proximity in creation and annihilation.

The troubling of the initial reading of the beacon as an all-powerful arranger of the world is continued in the reference to the sea as a puzzle that must be solved by the devices of humanity. The beacon’s lightgiving function is undercut by the evocation of the Gordian knot cut with a sword by Alexander the great. At first glance the "problem"
of the sea seems "solved" by the lighthouse shedding light on it; however, in the same way that Alexander did not really untie the Gordian knot, so also the lighthouse seems to be a type of "shortcut" to solving the problem. There seems to be a parallel arrogance between Alexander the Great who disdains to "untie" the knot and merely cuts through it and the individual who puts great faith in his ability to arrange or solve the chaos of the universe. Just as Alexander’s "solution" does violence to the integrity of the puzzle, so also, perhaps, does the speaker’s boasting notion that the beacon of his mind somehow cuts through the mysteries of the universe. The individual, like the lighthouse, may "blink at its brilliance" or be proud of the power of the mind, but underlying the universe (and this poem) is the threat of chaos, which is the "real" state of the world exterior to the individual.

The comforting structures that the imagination places on the chaos (such as the ocean-daughters and sea roads) disappear as the lighthouse turns away from the dark:

> Then in the flashes of darkness it is all gone,  
> The flung arms and the hips, meads  
> And meridians, all; and the dark of the eye  
> Dives for the black pearl

Of the sea-in-itself. Watching the blinded waves Compounding their eclipse, we hear their
Booms, rumors and guttural sucks
Warn of the pitchy whirl
At the mind's end. (ll. 9-17)

As the lighthouse turns away from the ocean, all of the projections of the mind disappear and what is left is the "actual" ocean, which can now only be heard. At the mind's end, there is only chaos, no inherent meaning. The order that the beacon has provided for the poem (as well as the orderly world Wilbur presents in other poems) momentarily vanishes. The ordered state on which the individual builds the universe vanishes and the chaos of the ocean, which the speaker claims exists in a completely unorganized state, returns.

In spite of the speaker's statement that the beacon brings order momentarily to the chaos, there is a somewhat contradictory statement that echoes the "eclipse" of line fourteen in the fifth stanza:

All of the sense of the sea
Is veiled as voices nearly heard
In morning sleep; nor shall we wake
At the sea's heart. (ll. 17-20)

Just as the sea is "eclipsed" by the loss of the light, the speaker emphasizes the unreachable nature of the "true ocean" by pointing out that it is always veiled whether it has light shining on it or not. Thus, the "meaning" of the ocean is forever beyond the grasp of the individual, being
twice removed from understanding. Yet, claiming that the meaning of the sea is somehow veiled begs the question. The speaker seems confident that the "sea-in-itself" truly exists apart from his gaze, but if it is truly beyond the grasp of the individual, the individual would never know whether it existed, much less whether it existed in an orderly or disorderly state.

In the last three stanzas of the poem, the speaker seems to sense the problem inherent in his initial statements and almost shouts the conclusion of the poem, seemingly to drown out the objections to contradictions inherent in the argument presented in the poem thus far:

... Rail

At the deaf unbeatable sea, my soul, and weep
Your Alexandrine tears, but look:
The beacon-blaze unsheathing turns
The face of darkness pale

And now with one grand chop gives clearance
to our human visions, which assume
The waves again, fresh and the same,
Let us suppose that we

See most of the darkness by our plainest light.
It is the Nereid's kick endears
The tossing spray; a sighted ship
Assembles all the sea. (l. 20-32)

The speaker can only turn back to imagination; the mind is helpless and sorrowful otherwise. The entire picture of the beacon being some sort of sword that cuts the knot of the night is imaginative as is the thought that the Nereids cause the waves to be tossed up. The speaker suggests that the supposed order the beacon provides is the work of imagination because he says of his final flight of fancy "let us suppose." He believes that the order is imaginary but seems to insist that imagination is all one has with which to fight the ocean and the darkness.

The "clearance" that the beacon offers is perhaps the freedom to imagine this sort of poem, since the poem is itself a sort of verbal beacon "founded" on the dangerous rock of language. In the same way that the sudden appearance of the ship turns the sea back to a mere body of water which can be sailed upon, readers of the poem demonstrate the validity of the poem beacon by offering testimony of its necessity. Underlying the poem is an awareness that constructing a poem beacon to provide order enhances the danger inherent in merely trying to perceive reality since it removes the reader of the poem one step further from the experience of the original perceiver. Thus, by undercutting the possibility of an exterior world and possible perceptions of that world, Wilbur is also troubling the poetic act. Every poem becomes an act of
faith/doubt, which only potentially provokes "truth" about a world exterior to the individual.

"The Beacon" strengthens the pole of doubt in Wilbur's poetry, and when pressed together with some of his other poems that express faith it evokes an interstice that meshes faith and doubt into a powerful interstitial statement consisting of the idea that faith and doubt in reality beyond the individual are both valid and necessary human experiences. Wilbur's interstices offer readers the notion that faith and doubt are ultimately inseparable since they are different aspects of the same experience; to disbelieve is merely to believe in subsequent speculation. Paradoxically, doubt and faith can flourish only in the presence of each other.
CONCLUSION

It is significant that Wilbur's use of apocalyptic interstice is not limited to his "serious" poetry. The concept of interstice is so basic to Wilbur's way of thinking that it even provides the basis for his many playful poems found in his book *Opposites*. In this short children's volume, Wilbur approaches the concept of opposites with tongue-in-cheek—a manner that at first glance seems miles apart from the more serious poetry that he is best known for. In *Opposites*, however, Wilbur toys with various opposites and uses interstices to achieve moments of humor as well as to provide momentary dislocation of objects that allows them to be seen from a different angle and appreciated.

One of the "opposites" in particular provides a link between Wilbur's serious poems that use interstices and these children's poems that revolve around poles of opposition that Wilbur creates:

The opposites of earth are two,
And which to choose is up to you.
One opposite is called the sky,
And that's where larks and swallows fly:
But angels, there, are few if any,
Whereas in heaven there are many.
Well, which word are you voting for?
Do birds or angels please you more?
It's plain that you are loath
To choose. All right, we'll keep them both.

It may seem strange to say, but I believe that Wilbur's use of interstices throughout his poetry can be most vividly witnessed in this one jesting poem. In the passage above, Wilbur brings two possible opposites of earth together and humorously comments upon them, playfully retaining both in the absence of the readers' willingness to choose one possibility over the other. He thus creates a momentary interstice between the two possibilities wherein heaven takes on physical qualities and the sky takes on a spiritual dimension. In this sense, readers are able to take something from each opposite and form a "meaning."

"Meaning" best describes what Wilbur's apocalyptic interstices accomplish throughout his poetry. If Wilbur is didactically trying to communicate "truth" at all, it is a truth that is an average or mean of more than one thing. In this sense, Wilbur's poetry eclectically takes various extreme poles and causes them to be pressed together to form an interstice out of which can come meaning still bearing something of both poles from which it came. Instead of forcing a "meaning" on the reader, Wilbur provides an interstice wherein readers can form their own "meanings" or
averages and discover the various relationships possible in the interstices.

In his best poems, Wilbur leaves much of the math to the reader; individual readers must choose what pleases them most and take from these interstices what they will. Wilbur’s suggestions regarding what the interstice provides are rarely restrictive, although he frequently does bring the interstices about in such a way as to lead readers to his own set of “meanings.”

The guidelines for “meaning” in his poetry are primarily brought about by the restrictions of the ideas or objects that he uses to create interstices. In this sense, Wilbur sees his task as that of the craftsman, bringing objects in the spiritual and physical world into juxtaposition, providing both faith and doubt and presenting them to the reader to interrogate. Wilbur goes about creating his interstices always with the thought in mind that both spiritual and physical worlds are solid enough to resist complete flexibility, but complex enough to defy single interpretations or viewpoints.

The last two stanzas of "Objects" (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems 1947) provide a final, fitting example of Wilbur’s sureness in the spiritual and physical worlds where he praises various parts of nature and concludes happily with joyful praise of life’s diversity:

For is there any end to true textures, to true
Integuments; do they ever desist from tacit,
Tragic fading away? Oh maculate, cracked, askew,

Gay-pocked and potsherid world
I voyage, where in every tangible tree
I see afloat among the leaves, all calm and curled,

The Cheshire smile which sets me fearfully free.

Even in the midst of the seeming chaos and mutability of the world, Wilbur's poetic vision invites us to find the mysterious, mischievous Cheshire spirit that blurs and fades like distant starlight when we look at it too directly, but which makes itself known and sets us free to find meanings from wildflowers and vultures in a world far from lonely, and perhaps not governed by our perceptions only.
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