**Kid Gloves: On Richard Wilbur**

In 1962 a brace of small but influential Penguins waddled into prominence:Contemporary American Poetry,selected and edited by Donald Hall, and The New Poetry,selected and edited by A. Alvarez. Hall picked on two immediately post-war books as marking the culmination of ‘past poetries’ and the beginning of a new poetry: these were Lowell’s Lord Weary’s Castleand Richard Wilbur’s The Beautiful Changes.For tremendous power under tremendous pressure, Lowell was your only man. For skilful elegance, but not for passion, Wilbur was likewise nonpareil. As Hall went on to point out, it was Wilbur who had the greater number of plausible imitators, and the typical duff poem of the fifties was the poème bien faitthat was not bien fait— the Wilbur poem not written by Wilbur. By 1962,Wilbur, in addition to The Beautiful Changes,had published Ceremony(1950),Things of this World(1956) and had brought out a large selection in England, Poems1943-1956.Advice to a Prophet(1961)was also out here by 1962,having been brought straight across by Faber with a haste well-nigh unseemly. Wilbur’s stock was high on both sides of the pond.

Turning to The New Poetry,though, we see that the two American poets Alvarez put forward as exemplary were not Lowell and Wilbur but Lowell and Berryman. Hanging by one well-muscled arm from an ice-axe lodged firmly in the north face of the Future, Alvarez wasn’t interested in grace under pressure so much as in the registration of pressure itself. For the New Seriousness, ‘gentility, decency and all the other social totems’ were not in themselves sufficient for the task of responding to the unique contemporary evils: if skill got in the road of urgency, then skill was out. Not much room for Wilbur there.

Getting on for ten years later, Wilbur has in fact faded right out: it’s doubtful if he is now thought of, on either side of the water, as any kind of force at all. Earlier this year a further volume came out, Walking to Sleep.A disproportionate amount of it consists of translations and although the original poems retain his customary technical perfection they hold no surprises beyond the usual polite sparkle of his aerated language — it’s the same old acqua mineraleand either it or our liver has lost tone. The book was greeted with muted satisfaction by the squarer critics but otherwise it was correctly thought to be a bit tired.

As it happens, I saw Wilbur in action at the American Embassy in that very Year of the Penguins, 1962. His reading was prefaced by a short expository routine from John Wain, who, while preparing us for Wilbur’s qualities, unaccountably chose to impersonate one of his own characters, Charles Froulish from Hurry On Down.(I think particularly of the moment when the rumpled and wildly gesticulating Froulish, getting set to read his magnum opus aloud, rips off his tie and throws it in the fire.) Into the pocket of high pressure created by this performance strode Wilbur, the epitome of cool. It was all there: the Ivy League hair-cut, the candy-stripe jacket, the full burnished image of the Amherst phi beta. Riding his audience like the Silver Surfer, he took European Culture out of his pocket and laid it right on us. We were stoned. It was the Kennedy era and somehow it seemed plausible that the traditional high culture of Europe should be represented in a super-refined form by an American who looked like a jet-jockey and that the State Department should pay the hotel bills. As the world well knows, the dream couldn’t last. It got ambushed in Dallas the following year. But it’s sometimes difficult to remember now just how solid-sounding a civilized front the U.S. was putting up in that period: it all clicked and it was all official. The internationalism of a mind like Wilbur’s, its seemingly relaxed roaming in the European tradition, fitted the picture perfectly.

Of that picture there is now nothing left, not even fragments, and looking back on it with what benefits accrue to a blighted hindsight we see that it was always false in the main — arrogant, insidious and self-serving. Better Johnson’s or Nixon’s instincts than Kennedy’s pretensions. Yet within the Kennedy era’s delusive atmosphere of distinction, Wilbur’s own distinction was real. He could not, in the ensuing years, respond to his country’s altered situation in the way that Lowell did, but I would be surprised if this meagreness of reactive energy turned out to be determined by complacency; up to 1956 at any rate, there is plenty in his poetry to show that he was deeply troubled by the huge dislocations that Alvarez saw as a characteristic, even exclusive, twentieth-century evil. But the point, I think, is that Wilbur’s intricately coherent art is suited to the long allaying of an old mental wound, and not to the sudden coping with a new one. The evidence of his work is that he was able to employ the decade or so after the war as a time of tranquility in which his experience of war-time Europe could be assimilated and in a way given back:his images of order, his virtuosities of symmetry, are particularly orderly and symmetrical when he is dealing with Italy and France, the two countries in which he served. In a sentimentalized but still powerful form, we can see the same spirit at work in the J. D. Salinger story For Esmé, With Love and Squalor,and with the same emphasis on fluent, formal speech as the instrument of recuperation. In the strict senses of both parts of the word, it is recollection: the healing wisdom comes after the event. Wilbur’s comparative silence in the face of the new (and this time American-inspired) disintegration of the world-picture is less likely to be a failure of response than a need for time. There is no doubt, incidentally, about what he thinks of it all — in 1967 he wrote a shattering occasional poem against Johnson’s philistinism, comparing him with Jefferson ‘Who would have wept to see small nations dread the imposition of our cattle-brand’. But otherwise in this decade he has mainly written mechanically in his own manner, giving the impression that an early challenge to his equilibrium had long been met and that a new one has not yet been faced. For the time being, at any rate, his poetry has lost its relevance. What I want to do now is to indicate what that relevance was when his poetry still had it.   
The Beautiful Changesset the level for Wilbur’s technical bravura and he has never since dropped very far below it: if the recent products look ordinary, it’s worth remembering that they are ordinary in a way that Wilbur himself established. If there were no more going on in his early poems than the dextrous flourishes of the dab hand that put them together, they would still be of permanent interest. Suggestions that Wilbur is fundamentally a punster in his diction are misleading. He is fundamentally a precisionist — he will make a word divert to a parallel, or revert to an antecedent, etymological stage, not to pun with it but to refurbish it.

Easy as cove-water rustles its pebbles and shells   
In the slosh, spread, seethe, and the backsliding   
Wallop and tuck of the wave...

The restoration of ‘backsliding’ to pristine condition is characteristic of his handling of language, and the enforced transfer of the reader’s eye-line back and down to the next starting-point (‘backsliding’ — pause — ‘Wallop and tuck’) is an elementary example of his mastery of mimesis. These lines are actually from a poem in Ceremony:I choose them because they contain instances of his two main technical preoccupations handily demonstrated in the one spot. But each trick was already everywhere employed in The Beautiful Changesand working to perfection. This, for example, is from ‘Cicadas’:

You know those windless summer evenings, swollen to stasis   
by too-substantial melodies, rich as a   
running-down record, ground round   
to full quiet.

Sound thickens when a disc slows down. Wilbur has noticed the too-muchness of the noise and neatly picked the word ‘rich’ as appropriate: the connotations, partly established by the preceding use of ‘swollen’ and ‘too-substantial’, are of a superabundance of nutrition rather than of pelf. As for the kinetic copy-catting, it’s so neatly done he makes it look easy: the two-ton spondee ‘ground round’ slows the line to a crawl and the enforced pause of the enjambement kills the action stone dead. Sheer class. This point-for-point matching of form to action reached one kind of excellence (I say one kind because I think that elsewhere there is another) in ‘My Father Paints the Summer’:

They talk by the lobby fire but no one hears   
For the thrum of the rain. In the dim and sounding halls,   
Din at the ears,   
Dark at the eyes well in the head, and the ping-pong balls   
Scatter their hollow knocks   
Like crazy clocks.

Just how it goes: ping/pong; SKAT! (could be a backhand smash); k/k/k/k. Less easily noticed, but still contributory, is the preceding Din/Dark, a duller pair of consonants. What we are given is a kind of Doppler effect as the writer leaves the hotel lobby and walks towards the source of the noises. Copy-cat equivalence has here reached one kind of limit (not that Wilbur didn’t go on exploiting it in later volumes) but in his superb poem ‘Grace’ it reached another kind — immediately more fruitful and eventually more troublesome. In these two stanzas from the poem, the first shows the first kind, the second the second:

One is tickled, again, by the dining-car waiter’s absurd   
Acrobacy — tipfingered tray like a wind-besting bird   
Plumblines his swinging shoes, the sole things sure   
In the shaken train, but this is all done for food,   
Is habitude, if not pure

Hebetude. It is a graph of a theme that flings   
The dancer kneeling on nothing into the wings,   
And Nijinsky hadn’t the words to make the laws   
For learning to loiter in air; he merely said,   
‘I merely leap and pause’.

The first stanza is Wilbur’s customary five or so under par for the course, and one surfaces from the dictionary convinced that the transition from stanza to stanza by way of those two near-homophones is neat and just. What ‘a graph of a theme’ is I don’t quite grasp, and can only deduce that it is the opposite of whatever motivates a dining-car waiter. But ‘The dancer kneeling on nothing into the wings’ is a genuinely amazing stroke, probably the best early instance in Wilbur of the mighty, or killer-diller, line. Here the mechanical principles of the mimetic effect are not fully open to inspection as they are in the earlier examples: the feeling, the ‘art-emotion’ that Eliot said could be created out of ordinary emotions, is not reducible to technicalities. Unprogrammed instead of programmed, perhaps even irrational instead of rational, the effect has been snatched out of the air by Wilbur during a temporary holiday from his usual punishing round of meticulous fidelity. When he showed he was capable of effects like this, he showed that the bulk of his poetry — his craftsmanship — was slightly stiff by his own best standards. As a rule of thumb, it can be said that the really glaring moments of falsity throughout Wilbur’s poetry are brought about when, in pursuit of such an effect, he snatches and misses. An early example is the last couplet of ‘The Peace of Cities’, which like a good many of his poems has the form of a two-part contention. Cities in peace-time are characterized first, and found to be more dreadful, because more inconsequential, than cities in war-time, which are characterized thus:

...there was a louder and deeper

Peace in those other cities, when silver fear   
Drove the people to fields, and there they heard

The Luftwaffe waft what let the sunshine in   
And blew the bolt from everybody’s door.

This clinching couplet sounds transcendentally silly, like some polished and perfumed banality dropped by Oscar Wilde on an off night. But the reasons for its emptiness go beyond a mere lapse of taste: they follow from what Wilbur is trying to do with his subject matter. He is trying to absorb the war’s evil into a continuous, self-regulating process — a process in which a subdued Manichaean principle is balanced against an aesthetic Grace. The material resists that absorption. The war is a mental hot-spot Wilbur tries to cool out, make sense of, reduce to order: trying to do that, he tends to devalue the experience, and his wealth of language becomes merely expensive-looking. All his poems on war-time subjects are flawed in their handling of language — his best gift goes against him. To take another example from The Beautiful Changes,‘First Snow in Alsace’ holds a delicate balance for most of its length as the snowfall softens the deadly starkness:

The ration stacks are milky domes;   
Across the ammunition pile   
The snow has climbed in sparkling combs.

You think: beyond this town a mile   
Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes   
Of soldiers dead a little while.

But he rounds the poem out with an orgy of consolation, providing the exact verbal equivalent of a Norman Rockwell cover-painting:

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

He was the first to see the snow.

With the possible exception of ‘Mined Country’ (and even that one is rounded out with a tough-tender metaphysical bromide) the poems in The Beautiful Changesthat treat the war theme directly are failures in total form as well as local detail. But they cast light on the poems that treat the war indirectly or leave it out altogether they demonstrate what kind of pressure it is that makes the successful poems such convincing examples of formal order attained with technical assurance but against great spiritual stress. ‘Lightness’, the best poem in the book and one of the finest things Wilbur ever wrote, is a two-part contention — and equation — about a falling bird’s-nest and a dying old American lady. It ends like this (‘he’ being her husband):

He called her ‘Birdie’, which was good for him.   
And he and the others, the strong, the involved, in-the-swim,   
Seeing her there in the garden, in her grey shroud   
As vague and as self-possessed as a cloud,   
Requiring nothing of them any more,   
And one hand lightly laid on a fatal door,   
Thought of the health of the sick, and, what mocked their sighing,   
Of the strange intactness of the gladly dying.

Aware of the countless European people whom death had found by no means intact and the reverse of glad, Wilbur picked his words here with an authority that has nothing to do with glibness. Strange, now, to think of a time when America could mean peace.

In all the elements I have so far dealt with, Wilbur’s first volume set the course for the subsequent ones — except that the overt treatment of war was for the most part dropped, and any concern for current, well-defined political crises was dropped along with it. He subsumed such things in a general concept of disorderly force, operative throughout history: they were the subjects his poem would redeem, rather than deal with. Each poem was to be a model of limpidity and no disturbance would be admitted which could not be deftly counterbalanced in the quest for equipoise. From Ceremonyonwards, successes and failures accumulated in about equal number; but what guaranteedfailure was when the disturbing force, the element of awkwardness, was smoothly denatured before being introduced as a component. It sometimes seemed possible that Wilbur was working in a dream-factory. Here is the second half of ‘A Plain Song for Comrade’, from Things of this World:

It is seventeen years   
Come tomorrow   
That Bruna Sandoval has kept the church   
Of San Ysidro, sweeping   
And scrubbing the aisles, keeping   
The candlesticks and the plaster faces bright,   
And seen no visions but the thing done right   
From the clay porch

To the white altar. For love and in all weathers   
That is what she has done.   
Sometimes the early sun   
Shines as she flings the scrubwater out, with a crash   
Of grimy rainbows, and the stained suds flash   
Like angel-feathers.

In poems like this the images of order came too easily: out-of-the-way hamlets were stiff with peasants who knew their place, and every bucket of slops could be depended upon to house an angel’s ailerons. But the successes, when they happened, were of high quality. ‘A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra’ is the stand-out poem in Things of This World.Again a two-part contention, it compares an elaborate fountain with a simple one, and without the slightest sense of strain draws a subtle conclusion that doubles back through its own argument. In describing the plain fountains in front of St. Peter’s Wilbur took his copy-catting to dizzy new heights:

Are we not

More intricately expressed   
In the plain fountains that Maderna set   
Before St. Peter’s — the main jet   
Struggling aloft until it seems at rest

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

With blaze, and then in gauze   
Delays, in a gnatlike shimmering, in a fine   
Illuminated version of itself, decline,   
And patter on the stones its own applause?

Virtuose almost beyond belief, this is periziataken to the limit. The way the vocabulary deflates as the water collapses, the way ‘patter’ and ‘applause’, already connected in the common speech, are separated and exploited mimetically — well, it’ll do till something cleverer comes along.

Of the killer-diller line there were a few instances, most notably in ‘Loves of the Puppets’ from Advice to a Prophet.It’s symptomatic, although not necessarily sad, that the lovers in Wilbur’s finest love poem should be made of papier mâché. The desperation of the last stanza, and the plangency of the tremendous final line, are prepared for not only by the rest of the poem but by our knowledge of Wilbur’s whole attitude: to ensure order in the real world, the disorder of unbridled passion must be transferred to Toy-land.

Then maladroitly they embraced once more,   
And hollow rang to hollow with a sound   
That tuned the brooks more sweetly than before,   
And made the birds explode for miles around.

But not many attempts at the art-thrill were as startling as that one. As Wilbur solidified his position, the general run of his poetry slipped past limpidity and got close to torpor. By the time of Advice to a Prophetself-parody was creeping in.

In a dry world more huge than rhyme or dreaming   
We hear the sentences of straws and stones,   
Stand in the wind and, bowing to this time,   
Practise the candour of our bones.

Here the pendulum has stopped oscillating or even shivering: it’s just a softly glowing, static blob.

Ten years have gone by since Advice to a Prophetand for most of that time the major American poets have been sweatily engaged in doing all the things Wilbur was intent on avoiding. Instead of ordering disorder, they have revealed the disorder in order; instead of cherishing a personal equilibrium they have explored their own disintegration; where he clammed up or elegantly hinted, they have clamorously confessed. To be doubtful about the course American poetry (and a lot of British poetry along with it) has taken, you do not have to be in entire agreement with Hannah Arendt’s warning that those men are making a mistake who identify their own personalities with the battlefield of history. You need only to be suspicious about artists playing an apocalyptic role. Nevertheless it is true that there is something sadly hermetic about Wilbur’s recent work.

Though, high above the shore  
On someone’s porch, spread wings of newsprint flap   
The tidings of some dirty war,   
It is a perfect day:

Here Wilbur seems to be trying to get at something specific, but once again he can only generalize — which is not the same as being specific in an oblique way. Apart from the powerful but localized hit at Johnson mentioned earlier, the serenity of previous volumes continues untroubled by any hint of altered circumstances. A solitary war poem, ‘The Agent’, consists entirely of formula situations sketched in flat language: the hardware is World War II surplus and the setting is a back-lot assemblage of instant Europe. It reads like a worn-out answer to a new challenge. The opening lines of the long title poem guilelessly reveal the strain of a metaphysical essay being flogged into existence:

As a queen sits down, knowing that a chair will be there,   
Or a general raises his hand and is given the field-glasses,   
Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.   
Something will come to you.

Something does — nearly two hundred lines of wheezing exhortation. (‘Avoid the pleasant room/Where someone, smiling to herself, has placed/A bowl of yellow freesias.’) Wilbur’s judicious retreat from raw experience has turned into mere insularity. It’s a relief to get to the collection of translations at the back of the book, and the back goes more than a third of the way towards the front.   
Yet with all this taken into account, there is still no reason to think that Wilbur will not eventually come up with something. At present he is off balance, a condition he is constitutionally unfitted to exploit. While he was on balance, though, he wrote a good number of poised, civilized and very beautiful poems. They’ll be worth remembering when some of the rough, tough, gloves-off stuff we’re lately supposed to admire starts looking thin. The beautiful changes — nobody denies that — but it doesn’t change that much. I don’t think it changes into Crow.

The Review,1971

Postscript

Strangely it was in the austere pages of The Reviewthat I seemed most determined to make every sentence an exploding firework. The inevitable result was a succession of damp squibs plus a flagrant sense of strain which would nowadays be interpreted as a desire to meet Julie Burchill. ‘We were stoned.’ ‘Sheer class.’ Terrible stuff: Ian Hamilton must have been a more tolerant editor than I thought at the time, when it seemed that his blue pencil was cutting me to ribbons while I leaned against the bar of The Pillars of Hercules trying to look as if I didn’t care. By no coincidence (as the academics were fond of saying in that period) stylistic razzmatazz was closely allied to rhetorical sleight-of-hand. ‘Wilbur has in fact faded right out’ was in fact nonsense: he had merely gone out of fashion, and to protect solid achievement against the vagaries of fashion was supposed to be one of the reasons I was a metropolitan critic. It can also be seen that Vietnam fever had infected my compositional brain-cells. ‘Strange, now, to think of a time when America could mean peace.’ It would have been more strange to think of a time when America meant anything else — which was the whole point of objecting to its role in Vietnam and of wanting it to withdraw, even in the light of the inevitable consequences to the Vietnamese people.

(1994)