

Chapter Title: Childhood in North Caldwell, New Jersey “Back where safety was”

Book Title: Let Us Watch Richard Wilbur

Book Subtitle: A Biographical Study

Book Author(s): Robert Bagg and Mary Bagg

Published by: University of Massachusetts Press. (2017)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv346vj6.4>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of Massachusetts Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Let Us Watch Richard Wilbur*

# 1

## *Childhood in North Caldwell, New Jersey*

“Back where safety was”

*Growing up in North Caldwell in what amounted to a little British colony, it was understood that anything British was better than anything American, at least contemporaneously. Of course we felt that George Washington was better than George III.*

—RICHARD WILBUR, interview by the authors, April 4, 2006

A memory from childhood opens each of the three stanzas of “This Pleasing Anxious Being,” a poem that Richard Wilbur wrote at the age of seventy-seven. In each stanza Wilbur pauses for a moment in the remembered scene and then feels time pulsing him forward, inevitably toward death. As he both presents his life and invites us to explore it through the poem, he quietly asserts his belief that the soul is immortal.

Wilbur renders the poem’s autobiographical facts in vivid detail, often with references to photography and painting, artistic genres that can influence our memories by capturing them and lifting them from their contexts. In the first stanza, for instance, he evokes the chiaroscuro technique in Georges de La Tour’s painting *The Nativity*, freezing his family (but only for a moment) in a serene but dramatically lit tableau—the dining room on an evening in the mid-1920s:

In no time you are back where safety was,  
Spying upon the lambent table where  
Good family faces drink the candlelight

As in a manger scene by de La Tour.  
 Father has finished carving at the sideboard  
 And Mother's hand has touched a little bell,  
 So that, beside her chair, Roberta looms  
 With serving bowls of yams and succotash.  
 When will they speak, or stir? They wait for you  
 To recollect that, while it lived, the past  
 Was a rushed present, fretful and unsure.  
 The muffled clash of silverware begins,  
 With ghosts of gesture, with a laugh retrieved,  
 And the warm, edgy voices you would hear:  
 Rest for a moment in that resonance.  
 But see your small feet kicking under the table,  
 Fiercely impatient to be off and play.<sup>1</sup>

### British Civility and Southern Manners

How the family came to be in that room—how Wilbur came to grow up in “a little British colony” in a small American town—involved a bit of serendipity.<sup>2</sup> In 1923, when he was two, his father, Lawrence Lazear Wilbur (1893–1976), met a British expatriate named Joshua Dickinson Armitage on a golf course in northern New Jersey. The men played their round with an Englishman named Stanley Pigeon, a mutual acquaintance. Pigeon, who spent time aboard a naval training ship with the British poet John Masefield when both were young and whose “extraordinary career doing this and that” included stints as a cowboy and an amateur violinist, had met Lawrence Wilbur while they were both enrolled at the Art Students League in New York.<sup>3</sup>

Armitage took a shine to Lawrence and offered him and his family, for minimal rent, residence in a handsome pre-Revolutionary-era stone house on Greenbrook Road, part of an otherwise British-style estate that Armitage was building for himself on 450 acres. As Wilbur explained in 2006, “My father and mother, who were always innocent people and willing to be influenced, took him up on it rather quickly.”<sup>4</sup> Across the road, on property purchased from Armitage, lived Pigeon and his wife Helen.

Wilbur's father had left his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, at age seventeen to study at the Art Students League, and he eventually became a freelance commercial artist. Though he never received the public recognition that J. C. Leyendecker, Norman Rockwell, and Howard Chandler Christy enjoyed, he was just as sought after by ad agencies and lithographic

companies. His poster commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Red Cross brought fame to Marie Bard, his model for the nurse; her image appeared on a two-cent U.S. postage stamp in 1931.<sup>5</sup> By midcareer, Lawrence was receiving commissions for billboard-sized portraits of each year's "Miss Rheingold" pageant winner, and his illustrations were frequently featured on *Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers* covers.<sup>6</sup> As technical advances in photography diminished the work available for magazine illustrators, he began focusing on portraits and landscape painting, glad to escape the four-color limitations of lithography to experiment with casein and watercolor.

Armitage was originally a Yorkshireman. Born circa 1866, he had immigrated to Boston's Beacon Hill from Manchester, England, bringing along his wife and a servant. On the 1890 U.S. Census he listed his occupation as a fabric designer. He held the patent for oilcloth and subsequently owned successful textile and paint-manufacturing operations in Newark, New Jersey, and in New England. By the early 1920s, Armitage, now a widower, was populating his North Caldwell "farm" with a community of British relatives, friends, and business associates, including the Nashes (his niece and her florist husband), a lawyer named Habberton, and other kindred spirits.

Armitage maintained that he had left England because of its landed gentry's disdain for men who made their fortunes "in trade." That may have been the only upper-class prejudice he rejected, for he retained the British aristocracy's Tory politics, which he naturalized into reflexive, anti-Roosevelt republicanism. Nonetheless, the people who lived in their various separate dwellings on the estate were, in Wilbur's words, "decent, attractive, civilized, kind, and gay," and living there suited his open-minded parents. Armitage, known as "Uncle," presided over his domain as if he had been born to the manor he had created, and young Dick Wilbur came to believe "that if the British did it, it was better."<sup>7</sup>

The Armitage estate was a multifaceted and instructive environment in which to grow up, and it offered Wilbur his first glimpse of adult society. The grown-ups organized cocktail parties and dinners, played bridge, lawn-bowled, and competed at tennis, although Uncle himself never appeared on the court. Wilbur describes that court, which was across the dirt road from the Wilbur house, as "rather strange."

[Armitage had] laid it out in the wrong direction so that the sun was always in someone's eyes. It was surrounded by Japanese honeysuckle which flourished there and was very deep so that every ball that went over the fence took a lot of cussing to retrieve. I've never seen a surface like that

since. It was fine gravel, so that one had to drag and roll between sets; it became very dug up by people's sliding on it. But nevertheless it was not a bad court, and it was a very important center of the farm for everybody involved.<sup>8</sup>

On Sundays Wilbur attended church and, in season, played tennis. "The flavor of both was remarkably similar," he remembers. "The rules for behavior [on the court] were very strict, and it was a very high-minded sort of game." His early religious education, however, was somewhat less intense.

We did say grace at dinnertime. I don't think we did for lunch, and it was never a long one, . . . probably a brisk saying of "For what we are about to receive let us be thankful." My father would never have been the one to say the grace. He'd been raised in a Presbyterian church, but not much raised. He didn't care for the piety. He'd go to an Episcopal church down in Montclair sometimes at my mother's insistence, and he'd come away saying, "Luke White [the pastor] seemed to talk sense this morning." He wanted people to talk sense and therefore had a resistance to a lot of religious talk. On some Sundays when my family was otherwise occupied I was taken by the head gardener of the farm to a nearby Baptist Sunday school, where we sang marvelous, rousing hymns and were given little tracts illustrated in terrible colors.<sup>9</sup>

The social spirit on the farm was cordial, inclusive, and respectful, though there were disruptions. One evening during the crisis that surrounded the abdication of King Edward VIII, Armitage declared that thrice-married Wallis Simpson was little better than a common whore. Fuming at his insult, Mrs. Habberton shot out of her chair. Declaring, "Uncle, I cannot stay at this table any longer," she abruptly left the room. The Nashes, who took a romantic view of Edward and Wallis, were distraught as well. The issue "caused a real division" and "broke up the universal admiration of England" held by most on the farm.<sup>10</sup>

But civility returned and prevailed, especially when Armitage's celebrity friends visited. Uncle arranged one afternoon for Wilbur's mother, Helen, to invite Sir Thomas Lipton, the tea-company and America's Cup magnate, to her home for some late afternoon refreshment. On bidding goodbye he complimented her, saying she was as charming as an English hostess. She replied, "And you, sir, have the manners of a southern gentleman."<sup>11</sup>

Helen Ruth Purdy Wilbur (1892–1981) was the daughter of a prominent Baltimore newspaperman, Clarence Melvyn Purdy, who worked for most of his career at the *Baltimore Sun*, moving through its ranks to become

the city editor. Helen often spoke about her childhood memories of H. L. Mencken, one of the paper's eminent contributors. When he came to dinner, his laughter "began at the door and never stopped until he left."<sup>12</sup> Clarence Purdy, whom everyone at the paper fondly called "Pop," took his grandson Dick to the *Sun* offices to shake hands with Mencken and the columnist Frank Kent as well as with the cartoonists Edmund Duffy and Richard Q. Yardley. The experience influenced Wilbur's involvement with his school newspapers and led him to consider becoming a journalist.

Helen Wilbur was lively, literate but not learned, and a perfectionist. She was also an expert whistler who encouraged her eldest son's eclectic enthusiasms, from cartooning to shortwave radio. Nonetheless, her driven nature backfired periodically. When Dick and his brother Lawrie were very young, she was sidelined by exhaustion after a miscarriage. Wilbur's wife, Charlee, who got to know her in-laws intimately (she lived with them while her husband was in the army during World War II), described Helen as "strong of will but not of body . . . and it turned out later that she had blood sugar problems with attendant fatigue." Charlee also sensed that the cloistered ambience of the farm, where the Wilburs lived in the midst of people who had more money than they did, exacerbated Helen's aspiring social desires and compounded the stress of running the household.<sup>13</sup>

"Tears," a poem that Wilbur never included in any of his books, suggests that his own sense of the animosity among social classes remained acute at least into his late twenties. The poem begins with a sarcastic description of the rich, with all the "burdens" their possessions and privilege entail: "The straight old men with scalloped skulls who bear / The Atlas weight of eighty years of ease." In the last stanza, after categorizing them as ignorant, insatiable, and unappreciative, the poet can only hope they get to experience what they've missed:

Pale porters of our wealth, who may not see  
The least magnificence with grateful eye,  
O takers of our ease, sad spenders whom  
The world can tease but never satisfy,  
I wish you other lives beyond the tomb,  
Of hunger, loss and sweet anxiety.<sup>14</sup>

Wilbur recalled reading "Tears" in North Caldwell at a lawn party hosted by Helen Pigeon in 1948, about a year after his first book drew critical acclaim. The poem failed to upset his parents' moneyed neighbors or the friends and Armitage family members who lived on the estate in various



Richard Wilbur and his mother, Helen Purdy Wilbur, winter 1922. *Courtesy of Richard Wilbur.*



rental or sale arrangements. They seemed to be telling themselves (with some truth, according to Wilbur) that they weren't "that kind" of rich while at the same time commenting to others, "Isn't that Wilbur boy a wonder?"<sup>15</sup>

The Wilbur's eighteenth-century stone house, venerable enough to be counted among those where George Washington had spent a night, had small rooms by 1920s standards. Before Uncle's tenure, in the days when the estate was primarily a farm, a large kitchen had been added in the rear to feed the hands. The Wilbur family employed live-in household servants during the boys' childhood but never more than one at a time, so the accommodations were ideal.

One black servant made a lasting impression on Wilbur. "Raymond was a pretty good cook, and when not cooking would whip on a cap and become chauffeur, and then appear in another rig as a butler. I remember him with delight," he said. "He had an amorous setback at one time. A new [child's model] typewriter had been given me and on it he typed, for the sake of a 'true confessions' magazine, I suppose, a story called 'My Stolen Love' [that] was never published. But he ruined my typewriter in the process."<sup>16</sup>

Helen's upbringing in Baltimore, a city with a strict black-white dividing line, complicated to some degree the Wilbur family's easy relationship with their black servants. Once, when Helen and Lawrence were away, the servants on the farm gave an unauthorized party. During the gathering someone showed Dick how to pare an apple so that the peel would fall away in an unbroken, spiraling strip. When he demonstrated this trick to his mother, she responded with suspicion about the circumstances rather than showing appreciation for her son's dexterity with a knife. Although she tried hard not to offend or show prejudice, and she genuinely liked the people whom she and Lawrence employed, she occasionally slipped into old southern ways. For instance, when calling attention to Dick's table manners, she once commanded him to "eat like a white man." As Wilbur recalled the scene, Roberta, the maid who looms over the table in "This Pleasing Anxious Being," was dishing out vegetables in that real-life moment. Everyone else winced, but Roberta, however she felt inside, remained outwardly cheerful.<sup>17</sup>

To express his views about social class difference, Wilbur wrote a number of poems based on observed or imagined scenes that were peopled by servants or the estate's hired hands rather than by its upper-class residents. In "A Summer Morning," for instance (from his 1961 collection *Advice to a Prophet*), he describes two servants relishing order and beauty both in



the household and the natural world while their young “masters,” who had partied too hard the previous night, sleep past breakfast. As the cook fries herself an egg and makes the coffee, she finds satisfaction in jelly jars lined up on the shelf, songs of the thrush and catbird in the terraced gardens, and the snip of the gardener’s shears. The gardener, diligently at work before the heat of day, surveys the estate and “receives the morning.” Making a distinction in the poem between what the servants satisfyingly *possess* and what the masters, in their oblivion, *own*, Wilbur echoes a judgment about the meaning of wealth similar to the one he made in “Tears.”

### “Thinking of happiness, I think of that”

Although Armitage’s emigration from Manchester was driven by his resentment of the landed gentry, Wilbur surmised that Uncle “wanted to set up as a country squire. He had the money at least initially to do so . . . [but] less money as time went on. The scale of the farm was such that it can’t ever have been profitable. The whole thing was charming, professional—he had good employees—but uneconomic, with saddle horses, milk cows, a bull, chickens, pigs, orchards, extensive vegetable and flower gardens, and hayfields.”<sup>18</sup>

The crew of farmers and gardeners necessary to run the farm allowed young Dick and Lawrie to interfere in, or at least observe, all their operations. Wilbur recalled:

I was involved in everything, tolerated as a child by the hands and allowed to participate in all sorts of exciting things like the spraying of the orchards and the killing of the pigs. I didn’t kill a pig, but I was there when they were killed. They make an awful noise. I think if I was older I would have found some of this horrifying. But I found it fascinating as a child. Chopping off chickens’ heads seemed the normal thing, and I thought it was funny when a chicken was decapitated and the body thrown out the window to run around for a while. . . . There was a lot of fun about it. I was allowed to ride in the hay wagon and bring the hay into the barn, and help shoot the silage up into the tower. Of course a farm like that is wonderful for playing games in, although Lawrie and I were repeatedly asked not to climb on the tiled roofs.<sup>19</sup>

Wilbur seemed to matter-of-factly accept death among the barnyard animals, but the loss of his beloved dog triggered childhood responses of fear, grief, and guilt. The collie, named Brownie, was struck by a car and dragged

by the driver into a clump of pine trees and honeysuckle vine at the edge of the farm's tennis court. In "The Pardon," published in *Ceremony* (1950), the adult narrator recalls how the dog lay dead for five days, long enough for the odor of decay to mix with the heavy-sweet scent of the honeysuckle; the ten-year-old boy, transfixed, could only watch while his father dug a hole and buried the dog. This failure of nerve inspires a dream in which the speaker asks Brownie, alive and emerging from the grass in a haze of flies, for forgiveness. The moment, whether desired or real, as the narrator explains, provides closure combined with hope that the past is never past redeeming.

Exposure to the farm's flora and fauna grounded Wilbur's imagination in the natural world—not the often vague and distant landscape that Wordsworth spiritualizes but one precisely and intimately observed with a budding naturalist's informed eye and exact vocabulary. Wilbur's early enthusiasm for the world of the farm moved him to learn from books and observe in meadows, fields, orchards, and streams the life cycles of insects, creatures, and plants, which became the inspiration for the metaphoric structure of many of the poems we discuss in later chapters, notably "Water Walker" (1945), which uses the caddis fly as a trope, and "Mayflies" (1999).

Wilbur has been considered a religious poet (at least a third of his published poems are inflected by his Christian belief, an aspect of his work we will revisit) but almost never a visionary poet. When this visionary aspect does appear, it carries readers through a cycle from life to death and beyond. Six poems in Wilbur's 2004 *Collected Poems* are set (or open with a scene) on the farm. All of them qualify as visionary, and two warrant mention here: "He Was," first published in *Ceremony*, and "Running," from *Walking to Sleep* (1969).<sup>20</sup>

The title of "He Was" runs directly into the first of its eighteen lines, "a brown old man with a green thumb." The sounds that the speaker hears come not from the gardener's mouth but from his tools: the scream of his hoe and the "chug, choke, and high madrigal wheeze" of a spray cart soaking the orchard's trees. In the poem's last lines Wilbur shifts to language seen rather than heard: the "voice" that the old man expertly cultivated during his working life, with his hands buried in "livening clay," now rises among the leaves into the "sparrowy air" of the orchard.

In "He Was," Wilbur not only demonstrates his belief in a benign higher power at work in the world but also, by registering pleasure at seeing a man's labor come to fruition after his death, celebrates the gardener's connection

to that power. For Wilbur, the gardener's legacy of flowering trees sends a message as meaningful as (and perhaps more profound than) any rendered by the spoken word. In evermore ambitious poems over the decades he has continued to explore the ways in which the natural and spiritual world reflect one other.

The first section of "Running," which is dated 1933 and set in North Caldwell, opens with a recollection of Wilbur's childhood fondness for games such as prisoner's base: he describes leaping into the air, bouncing off a hummock-side, and then sprinting across the flats, too young to tire or even to fear tiring. In the second section, set on Patriots' Day in Wellesley, the speaker is one among many spectators ("we fathers and our little sons") watching Boston Marathon runners sweep by as they ascend Heartbreak Hill. In the third and final section, we see the speaker, now pushing fifty, jogging out of the woods bordering his home in Cummington and then slowing "to a swagger," ribs aching, as the road turns and sinks toward a pasture in the west. The poem ends after he meets two boys who are throwing rocks and chasing a dog as it yaps and flushes out a pheasant from the tall grass. Imagery in all three sections evokes the movement of humans, flora, and fauna as they ascend toward and then descend from the heavens. (We return to the kinetic quality of Wilbur's verse in chapter 6.)

Such activity brings to mind Frost's poem "Birches," with its "going and coming back" to earth as well as its famous line, "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches." That poem, which opens as the speaker is observing saplings bent nearly to the ground, is often interpreted as a desire for a temporary escape, through the imaginings of childhood, from the adult world and its rationales. The speaker would prefer to think that the youngsters who swayed through the air on those pliant adolescent trees caused the trunks to bow so low, not "Truth . . . / With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm."<sup>21</sup>

But Wilbur has in mind a different aspiration in "Running" than Frost expresses in "Birches," with its longing to dip in and out of the pleasures of boyhood exuberance. In the third section Wilbur reflects on an intrinsic value of life that humans search for and want to cling to, first by acknowledging the near impossibility of possessing or even recognizing it:

What is the thing which men will not surrender?  
It is what they have never had, I think,  
Or missed in its true season.

The speaker, who clearly identifies with such a metaphysical quest, is thus running, too, in pursuit of something he alone cannot overtake. His answer is to reclaim that joy from childhood—"Thinking of happiness, I think of that," as the North Caldwell section concludes—and bestow it as best he can on the future: "I make a clean gift of my young running / To the two boys who break into view," the speaker declares in the final Cummington section.

In both "Running" and "He Was," Wilbur's practice as a visionary poet is grounded not only in the idea of legacy—of spirit invested and reborn—but also in his connection to his surroundings in the natural world. In these poems and others like them, he has emerged on the page (much as he does in public) as a quiet, hopeful, and optimistic man. Compared to many twentieth-century poets who found the road to fame running through the valleys of despair and self-destruction—from Hart Crane and Delmore Schwartz to Lowell, Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath—Wilbur may seem almost suspiciously normal.

### **"Be modest about any little thing"**

Wilbur has described Joshua Armitage as "something of a Maecenas," a patron of the arts whose generous offer of housing had brought the Wilbur family to his estate in 1923.<sup>22</sup> In December 1928, perhaps as a Christmas gift to his patron, Lawrence Wilbur created a whimsical watercolor map of the property, which today hangs in Wilbur's Cummington home. Under a banner with the title "A portion of the estate of Mr. J. D. Armitage in North Caldwell, N.J.," he painted an unfurled scroll with a key to the map and a disclaimer: "A graphic design executed with an eye for depicting a few salient details and interesting truths rather than accurately conforming to the physical facts." The compass arrow points "somewhat North," and the main locations, labeled A, B, C, and D, are identified, respectively, as "The Orchard," "The Meadow," "The Deep Tangled Wildwood," and "The Old Oaken Bucket," the latter shown hanging from a rope underneath the covered well next to the Wilbur's stone house. In addition to homes, out-buildings, and farm structures such as a silo and a chicken coop, notable features include a tennis court, a pitch for lawn bowling, and a swimming pool.

Demonstrating a quirky sensibility (one that Dick Wilbur seemed to observe, internalize, and express in his own early sketches and cartoons), Lawrence left the court and the pool empty but, on a painted patch of

lawn, added illustrations of figures serving a ball, doing the crawl stroke, and diving. Elsewhere on the map, scattered throughout the woods, meadows, and cultivated fields, he painted disembodied hands that point to figures engaged in activities such as hunting, bird watching, planting, and frolicking.

After living on the estate for several years, Lawrence and Helen bought the stone house. Although Armitage had built a north-lit portrait studio next to the house, Lawrence continued to commute to his studio on Twenty-third Street in Manhattan, which he still needed for his commercial work and contacts. For Dick, his father's urban workplace became a new base from which to investigate and explore. He haunted bookstores and magazine vendors, acquiring and reading much current fiction and a huge range of political journalism, including the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*. (Curiously, says Wilbur, his family never had a subscription to the *New Yorker*, but their modest house was filled with stacks of *Town and Country* and other magazines whose images would inspire scenes and settings for his father's commercial work.)

Lawrence was "utterly devoted to painting," and he found nothing more relaxing after a tiring day at his easel than to sit in a chair turning the pages of art books, all of which became part of Wilbur's own collection after his father's death. Art, in practice and as a subject of historical study, pervaded the North Caldwell household. In Wilbur's writing, its influence is palpable, not only in references to paintings (such the Georges de La Tour work mentioned in "This Pleasing Anxious Being") and in ekphrastic poems (such as "Wyeth's Milk Cans") but also in a remarkable essay that Wilbur wrote while he was a graduate student at Harvard, in which he distinguished Degas's approach to representation from that of his Impressionist contemporaries.

During one of our interviews with Wilbur in 2007, the subject of modesty crept in and out of the conversation. "I don't believe in a modesty gene," he exclaimed. He was talking about the fixed personality traits of the characters in Corneille's play *The Theatre of Illusion*, which he was translating at the time.<sup>23</sup> The discussion prompted him to reminisce about his upbringing and then about how his father, facing death, assessed the scope of his own achievement in comparison to his son's:

I am sure I was encouraged by my parents to be modest about any little thing I'd done, and there were a lot of negative terms for those who were not. . . . I don't remember my father as saying a bragging thing, and he

was the sort of person who is good at everything he does. And he was never daunted on the croquet court or anywhere else. When he was dying my father . . . had a feeling which many dying men must have, that he was going to disappear without a trace. And he said to me during our last conversation, "All my paintings are scattered all over the place; you're lucky, all your stuff is in books." And I said to him, "But, Dad, a book can sit on the bookcase untouched for decades, whereas your paintings are up on the walls and people are looking at them and in many cases admiring them." And he agreed, tentatively, "Yes, I guess that's true."<sup>24</sup>

A seascape painted by Wilbur's father figures significantly in the second stanza of "This Pleasing Anxious Being," which is set on the Maine coast where the family vacationed when Wilbur was a child. He frames the scene within another picture—a photograph of a picnic in progress.

The shadow of whoever took the picture  
Reaches like Azrael's across the sand  
Toward grown-ups blithe in black and white, encamped  
Where surf behind them floods a rocky cove.  
They turn with wincing smiles, shielding their eyes  
Against the sunlight and the future's glare,  
Which notes their bathing caps, their quaint maillots,  
The wicker picnic hamper then in style,  
And will convict them of mortality.  
Two boys, however, do not plead with time,  
Distracted as they are by what?—perhaps  
A whacking flash of gull-wings overhead—  
While off to one side, with his back to us,  
A painter, perched before his easel, seeing  
The marbled surges come to various ruin,  
Seeks out of all those waves to build a wave  
That shall in blue summation break forever.

By casting the photograph in the shadow of Azrael, the angel of death, Wilbur conveys an immediate sense of inexorability. He then exposes a strange, though mundane, aspect of our culture's affection for the family photo album, which over time exerts its power to both preserve and doom its human subjects. Note the grammatical economy with which he accomplishes this task. For instance, he pairs the "sunlight" of the picnic day with "future's glare." The word *glare* becomes an unusual personification—a vision of the future as a glowering prosecutor/judge who uses the photo as evidence to "convict" the people it captures "of mortality."

Present within the photo Wilbur describes is an image that transcends a photo's ability to freeze time: Wilbur's father painting a wave. The father sees, as his son interprets it, "the marbled surges [coming] to various ruin." Though the image of "marbled surges" nicely catches the white inlay of foam in the swelling darker water, it also involves us in real and historical time by connecting the wave to its imminent breaking (or "ruin"), as if the wave were an artifact (which it is becoming on the canvas).

One word in particular characterizes Wilbur's unflagging resourcefulness in critical moments of this poem: he calls the welling up of the water, just before it breaks, a "summation." Artist and ocean also come together in that word: the artist's imagination sums up many waves from reality's repertoire to paint and preserve the perfect one. Here is a beach scene, unlike the photo's, that has literally no downside, no mortal undertow.

In the third stanza of "This Pleasing Anxious Being," Wilbur makes swift cuts from one scene to the next. The word "flicker" in the last line invokes "moving pictures," which became the dominant medium of popular culture during his childhood:

Wild, lashing snow, which thumps against the windshield  
 Like earth tossed down upon a coffin-lid,  
 Half clogs the wipers, and our Buick yaws  
 On the black roads of 1928.  
 Father is driving; Mother, leaning out,  
 Tracks with her flashlight beam the pavement's edge,  
 And we must weather hours more of storm  
 To be in Baltimore for Christmastime.  
 Of the two children in the backseat, safe  
 Beneath a lap-robe, soothed by jingling chains  
 And by their parents' pluck and gaiety,  
 One is asleep. The other's half-closed eyes  
 Make out at times the dark hood of the car  
 Ploughing the eddied flakes, and might foresee  
 The steady chugging of a landing craft  
 Through morning mist to the bombarded shore,  
 Or a deft prow that dances through the rocks  
 In the white water of the Allagash,  
 Or, in good time, the bedstead at whose foot  
 The world will swim and flicker and be gone.

This cinematic focus seems to imply that what we see is all we know; the rest is inference. It suggests that our lives are films, which, like poems,



flash forward and must always end. As the car plunges toward Baltimore through snow, its momentum into the dark gives the child a foretaste of riding through (and finally out of) time.

Wilbur disperses this thrust among three additional vehicles, all of them relevant because they, too, impart an awareness of danger and mortality to the person who once rode in them, whether they were real or metaphorical. The black hood of the yawing Buick morphs into the landing craft that carried the poet to an embattled French Riviera beach on August 15, 1944, and then into the “deft prow” riding over stomach-churning rapids in the Allagash. (Wilbur admitted that this river appears in the poem only because he liked the sound of its name and said that “stomach-churning” can characterize any number of his real-life experiences and adventures.) Finally, the family car becomes a ship of death crossing imagined waters over a lifetime and transporting Wilbur to the bed in which he will die.

Wilbur’s construction of the stanza’s last sentence demonstrates his mastery of precise and powerful implication. “The world will swim and flicker and be gone,” while his own hovering “pleasing anxious being” remains the observer of his earthly life. In other words, the soul is immortal. He borrowed the poem’s title from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), which reflects on the lives of those buried in the cemetery by imagining a ghost who hovers over a grave and revisits scenes from the life he has just left.<sup>25</sup>

Wilbur’s projection of his earlier self—as a boy with “half-closed eyes” who “might foresee” the dangers and death that lie ahead as snow “thumps against the windshield / Like earth tossed down upon a coffin-lid”—imbues the trip to Baltimore with a sense of life’s inevitable end. The entire poem, like his father’s breaking wave, is a summation of mortality as an invisible tidal force that shapes and darkens vivid childhood memories. Those memories evoke the most famous line that Gray ever wrote, also from his churchyard “Elegy,” which may serve as the poem’s implicit epigraph: “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

### **“Adolescent necks stuck out for the yoke of adulthood”**

Because Wilbur grew up in the Armitage farm’s rural community, he rarely spent time with other children in his preschool years. Thus, self-reliance was not an optional virtue but inherent to his daily existence. He remembers only two boys who lived within walking distance, Rob Roy Tredennick



Lawrence Wilbur, Christmas-card portrait of his sons, Dick and Lawrie, circa 1930. *Courtesy of Richard Wilbur.*

and Medford Bach (pronounced *Batch*), not for the frequency with which they visited the farm but for their unusual names. His brother Lawrie, two and a half years younger, was his lone companion. The pair invented their own games, sometimes to indulge their mischievous spirits. For instance, when assigned to clear snow off the short front walk, they once shoveled a sinuous path several times longer than the actual walkway.<sup>26</sup>

Wilbur remembers that his parents had a talent for getting their sons

into good schools: “I don’t know how they wangled it. . . . It can’t have been with money.”<sup>27</sup> The first was Essex Fells Primary School, where Wilbur became a natural pied piper. Instead of joining his schoolmates in their playground games, he sometimes conscripted them into eccentric rites of his own devising. This trait often disturbed his teachers and the school’s principal, Cathleen Tufts. During recess Wilbur once persuaded the entire student body to forgo the usual rope skipping, hopscotch, marble shooting, and ball games to assemble en bloc and parade around the school building, counting laps. Miss Tufts came outside and called a halt at lap 14.<sup>28</sup> His peers became increasingly intrigued by Wilbur and his quirks—for instance, his ability (in his words) to “turn his eyes inside out” so only the whites were visible—and Miss Tufts began to think of him, not in a positive way, as *capable of anything*.

One morning, as he was waiting for his fourth-grade teacher to arrive in the classroom, Wilbur drew a caricature of her on the blackboard. She was offended and took steps to identify the artist. Well aware of the boy’s precocious draftsmanship, she asked him if he knew who had drawn the likeness. He answered, “I do, but I don’t want to tell on him.”<sup>29</sup> Flummoxed, and probably impressed, she eased up and complimented him for upholding the schoolboy honor code he had coolly ducked behind.

During seventh grade at Essex Fells, Wilbur organized something he called the Death Club. The club had no function other than to initiate new members (boys only). Though it involved a bit of harassing, its only relation to death was his “fascination with making jokes about morgues.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the club’s troubling name reached adult ears and gave Miss Tufts one more reason to watch him like a hawk.

Wilbur developed many “one-man interests” that helped him connect to the world beyond New Jersey. In eighth grade he took to the airwaves, constructing his own crystal set and learning to tap out Morse code. In ninth grade he assembled a shortwave radio with directional roof antennae so he could listen to voices from Europe and Asia and to broadcasts from Java’s Progressive Liberal Party.<sup>31</sup> His childhood fascination with puzzles as well as his radio and code hobbies led him, as a teenager, to take a U.S. government course in elementary cryptography and acquire an expertise that facilitated his enlistment into the Army Signal Corps in 1942.

Despite his engagement in the larger world and his ability to enlist his schoolmates in his escapades, Wilbur told us that he was lonely during most of his high school years.

I felt like an odd bird when I was young, and I gradually became capable of the sort of ease and complacency it seems to me that some people are born with. Having had these thoughts about my feelings of oddity I thought maybe that's of no interest at all, maybe that's what everybody feels. Not everybody will own up to it, but I think of the teenagers I have known and it seems to me that most of them have had an awkwardness and inner agony going on. If there's anything interesting about me to tell [in that regard] it's mostly the struggle to find out to what uses I could put my verbalism. I enjoyed drawing pictures and using words and I've tried all kinds of ways of doing both.<sup>32</sup>

When Wilbur was eight years old, *John Martin's Book*, a children's magazine, accepted his poem "Nightingales," a precocious but otherwise unremarkable submission overshadowed by the second poem he sent to the editors. That eight-line verse, "Puppies," featured a set of poetic reflexes that has persisted throughout Wilbur's life. The word "opposite" will jump out at his fans:

Said puppy one to puppy two,  
 "I'm just the opposite from you.  
 I always love a good hard scrub  
 In a little wooden tub."

Said puppy two to puppy one,  
 "I was like that when I'd begun,  
 But now I *hate* a good scrub  
 In a little wooden tub."

Wilbur's fascination with opposites sparked an entire poetic genre drawn from the oddities of language, and his mastery of lexical mayhem has extended into a series of playful books: *Opposites* (1973), *More Opposites* (1991), and a collected volume of opposites called *A Few Differences* (2000), all self-illustrated in a style he began to develop with some notoriety in grammar school. In *The Pig in the Spigot* (2001) he delighted in exposing shorter words hidden in longer ones and then created silly verses to justify how and why they came to be that way. ("Moms weep when children don't do as they say. / That's why there's a *sob* in *disobey*.") In *The Disappearing Alphabet* (1998) he worked in an opposite way, imagining the absurd results if a particular letter were suddenly unavailable. ("No *N*? In such a state of things, / Birds would have WIGS instead of WINGS.")

Throughout childhood and adolescence Wilbur fed his early talent for developing surprising connections and comparisons by soaking up

the work of the era's renowned humorists and cartoonists. In the process he honed his skills at teasing out implications and moral consequences through pictures and words. As a teenager, he amassed a collection of clippings that recounted bizarre incidents and absurdities deemed newsworthy. One from 1933 announced that a man registered at the Hotel Webster (on West Forty-fifth Street) as Frank Lynch of Fairfax, Virginia, had hanged himself in his room after writing six suicide notes, one of which bequeathed an autographed pack of cigarettes to the policeman who would discover his body.<sup>33</sup>

It is hard to read Wilbur's "Pity," published in *Ceremony*, without thinking he had been inspired by another such clipping, perhaps from the annals of *News of the Weird*. "Pity" reports the story of a murderer who leaves a canary trapped in its cage at the scene of the crime and then returns to set it free. In the unfolding narrative, Wilbur reveals a darkly ironic justification manifest in the damaged man's soul. As he likens the bird's escape to a bad thought fleeing a cracked brain, he suggests that, after taking a human life, it is possible to clutch at redemption by saving a bird's. Such sublimated irony and black humor appear in his grammar school musing and writings and certainly in the jaded voice of "puppy two."

Wilbur was actively involved in several youth publications, among them the *Nottingham News*, a mimeographed newsletter distributed to Boy Scout campers in 1933. His reporting for the newsletter ranged from the mundane (for instance, in an announcement that Mr. Bartlett, who had recently graduated from Springfield College with a bachelor's degree in physical education, would be returning the following summer to correct the boys' posture) to the whimsical, as in his short piece "The Difficulty of Getting Out a Newspaper (and what a paper)" ghostwritten under the name Buglestein P. Potts. Potts accused the editors of procrastination; "Neglecting [the news]," he opined, "is what they're good at."<sup>34</sup> Wilbur wrote for the *Scout Herald*, the *Tulip Leaf* (distributed to the Boy Scouts of Camp Glen Grey), and the YMCA's *Hi-Y*. He also published long, anticipatory articles in the daily *Montclair Times* about the upcoming Boy Scout National Jamboree scheduled for the summer of 1935 in Washington, D.C., an event that would be canceled because of an outbreak of polio near the site.<sup>35</sup>

Though he was physically active on the Armitage estate, Wilbur never joined a sports team. He did compete in and win a single interscholastic event, however, when Montclair High School's track team conscripted him into the high jump at a meet. His ability to leap over obstacles had been

honed on the farm and continued at Essex Fells, where he excelled at informal broad jump competitions. He usually ran the first leg of his seven-mile high school commute, and he continued to run for most of his life. Helen Pigeon, his godmother, a nationally ranked tennis star who had played at Longwood, had taught him to play tennis at age eight. But Wilbur never took to golf, the sport that had connected his father to Joshua Armitage. In fact, as his poem "Lying" (1987) suggests (in the lines "Later, however, talking with toxic zest / About golf, or taxes, or the rest of it"), he developed an aversion to the game.

Wilbur's progressive politics and his attentive and respectful manners sprang, in part, from the unusual circumstances in which he was raised. Dick and Lawrie absorbed social graces from their neighbors on the estate, where personal affection between the rich landowning industrialist and his artistic tenants flourished. Although Helen and Lawrence were Republicans, they did not share Armitage's extreme right-wing views or impose their own politics on their eldest son. Nor did they discourage his fascination with the entire political landscape and its global cast of characters (dozens of whom he sketched in pencil, including Wendell Willkie, Groucho Marx, and Adolf Hitler), his reading of radical publications, his support for Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, his investigation of socialism as an alternative to capitalism, and his sympathy for the nation's suffering population during the Depression.

Every issue of Montclair High's *Mountaineer* published during his term as editor in 1937–38 includes a Wilbur cartoon that reveals his political sympathies and his capacity for indignation. One, responding to the congressional debate on the Child Labor Law, shows the ghost of Lincoln quietly calling Uncle Sam's attention to a young boy who staggers under the weight of a sack labeled "Adult Load." Another shows a matron on her way home from Christmas shopping. Laden with purchases, she snootily ignores an unshaven and shivering homeless man huddling with a toddler in the doorway of the "Cut-Rate" store.<sup>36</sup>

As Wilbur developed as a writer in high school, the performer's instinct evident during his pied piper phase at Essex Fells surfaced in an increasingly exuberant and sometimes reckless sense of humor. (A teacher named Mr. Byrd, a cautious man who oversaw the school newspaper and didn't want the editorials to be too violent, was always after Wilbur to read Wordsworth as a calming influence.) When his sophomore English teacher assigned the class to cover Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as if they were news



reporters, Wilbur handed in a detailed story with a series of headlines, including these two:

**BASSANIO FAILS IN CASKET CHOICE AT BELMONT**

Thereby forfeits right to marry

**"POUND OF FLESH" TRIAL BEGINS TODAY**

Shylock expresses his confidence in the outcome

Antonio seems concerned.<sup>37</sup>

Wilbur's *Mountaineer* editorials, similar to those he would write for Amherst College's *Student*, have almost nothing to do with high school issues but address either national controversies or a current idea that irritated or animated his sense of the ridiculous. He seemed not to have (as yet) internalized much inhibition or self-censorship. Usually gently, sometimes abrasively (as he would deride the upper class a decade later in "Tears"), but always with fearless glee, Wilbur chronicled the foibles and follies of whatever authority figure crossed his line of sight—a local Episcopal priest, his teachers, women bridge players, hometown or national politicians orating on Memorial Day, celebrity newspaper columnists.

During the nine months of his senior year Wilbur's varied *Mountaineer* articles demonstrated a consistent contrariness. The attitudes he displayed as a teenager are worth recording in some detail. Advocating pacifism, he assailed and then advised his readership: "You are the war makers. You, at the ringside watching bullmen batter each other, . . . peace is an individual effort. Peace is you saying 'I will not fight.' People laugh at you when you talk about turning the other cheek. Try it. It is the ultimate test of self-control."<sup>38</sup> He also used the forum to complain about a panoply of annoying topics: the dullness of editorials about "Christmas Spirit"; the pervasiveness of cynicism (in which he included a primer on how to make oneself a thoroughgoing cynic); the banality of suburban conversation; the insincere, automatic side of etiquette; spongers who cadge pens, cigarettes, and other handy items instead of buying their own.

On the other hand, Wilbur championed the unique nature of American humor and its brilliant contemporary practitioners, including Don Marquis, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, and E. B. White. He urged radicals and conservatives to engage in a rhythm of creation and stability that would allow the U.S. political system to do its work. He was an advocate of government support for the arts (but not governmental control or censorship of artists' works). He wrote about the characteristics of true thinking and



how we mostly avoid it; the imminent decline and fall of the English language, with multiple examples cited from idle chat heard in northern New Jersey; the foibles of adults traveling down the path to self-improvement; and the wrong-headed idea that youth is the salvation of our nation. The following excerpt targeting adulthood appeared in the *Mountaineer* issue dated October 15, 1937:

Stand next to a high school boy and you can almost hear him maturing. Hundreds of adolescent necks [are being] stuck out for the yoke of adulthood. . . . One of these years a younger generation is going to rebel. It is going to say: "The heck with becoming adult; we're immature and we love it. Go ahead and stay grown up if you want to—we're not interested." . . . The whole system of adulthood is all wrong, and has survived merely for the lack of an alternative. . . . Adulthood has degenerated into a mold. Dale Carnegie has just gotten out a book of exercises showing people [how] to be different from what they are. *Scribners* [magazine] and the psychologists have got the middle class half crazy wondering whether they are neurotics, escapists, psychotics, introverts, or just people. Think of the street of the future: throngs of people making friends and influencing people on every corner. Thousands of people who want to talk about YOUR problems. Eternally smiling, solicitous, engaging and thoroughly boring. A frightening prospect.<sup>39</sup>

The seventeen-year-old who drove to Amherst College with his parents in September 1938—through Connecticut and Massachusetts up Routes 5 and 10, then called the College Highway—had graduated from high school demonstrating exceptional success as a writer and as an impromptu spell-binder. He was well grounded in the literary and intellectual habits he had been exposed to in his childhood and adolescence, was impelled to explore the larger world (physical, natural, and scientific), was impatient with convention and foolishness, and was attracted to the grotesque and the absurd. Unsurprisingly, however, he was less prepared for the social world of girls, parties, and proms. He was still uneasy about himself, despite his deep and assertive voice and his youthful but dashing appearance. Working against a seamless adjustment to Amherst's sophistication and mores was his awareness that he played roles in order to impress and possessed an overwhelming drive to succeed as a writer and editor. As the grandson of a highly respected newspaperman and the son of a commercial artist, the lure of journalism would defer his success as a student but not interfere with his matriculation as a scholar and intellectual.