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“Beauty Joined to Energy”: Gravity and Graceful Movement in Richard Wilbur’s Poetry

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
English  
Teaching

by

Elizabeth Lynch  
B.A. University of Dallas, 2013

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## Abstract

Throughout his work, Wilbur maintains a thematic and aesthetic fascination with kinetic energy, especially insofar as this graceful movement often seems to defy the world's gravity. Wilbur's energetic verse and imagery invites readers to delve into the philosophical and spiritual meditations of his poems, as well as to notice the physical world anew. The kinetic aspects of Wilbur's subject matter, wordplay, wit, and figurative language elucidate the frequent tempering of gravity with levity within his work. Many critics have studied Wilbur's philosophy, Christianity, metaphors, wordplay, and approach to language as found in his poetry, but this essay attempts to use a framework of kinetic energy potential energy, gravity, and weight to understand these various aspects of his work.

Keywords: Richard Wilbur, poetry, kinetic energy, energy, gravity, wordplay

## 1. Introduction

When we enter the world of Richard Wilbur's poetry, we encounter minnows darting through patches of light in a brook; flecks of color moving, changing, rearranging, and coruscating in a kaleidoscope; a trapped bird beating against walls and window; and an ecstatic saint running barefoot across Spain. We see mayflies dancing in an evening forest and white chickens bustling and bobbing their heads. A flock of birds soars gracefully through the skies, and lambs cavort in a field. All of these images capture the brilliance of motion, and they all come alive in the poems of Richard Wilbur, who celebrates their kinetic energy in his verse, which itself is filled with a witty, verbal energy of wordplay and metaphor. Energy—especially the energy of movement—infuses his language and his imagery, often reminding readers of the philosophical and spiritual aspects of existence and awakening in them a renewed perception of a perhaps too-familiar world.

Certainly, the energy of language, of mind, and of physical motion pervades Wilbur's poetry on many levels. In a 1977 interview with *The Paris Review* Wilbur stated: "To put it simply, I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy, that the energy tends to take pattern and shape, and that the ultimate character of things is comely and good" (Butts 190). The universe of Wilbur's poems is indeed brimming with "glorious energy," which flows through both the imagery and the linguistic elements of his work. Wilbur's 1950 poem, "Museum Piece," for example, praises artwork which celebrates energy. The poem begins by setting the scene of a quiet museum, where several "good gray guardians of art / Patrol the halls on spongy shoes" while their coworker "dozes...against the wall, / Disposed upon a funeral chair" (*Collected* 365). The stillness of the scene is interrupted only by a painting that hangs above the slumbering sentry

in which a “Degas dancer pirouettes / Upon the parting of his hair.” The poem then praises the ballerina in the painting:

See how she spins! The grace is there,

But strain as well is plain to see.

Degas loved the two together:

Beauty joined to energy.

The poem jumps from the sleepiness of the museum to the energy of the painting, and just as Degas “loved the two together: Beauty joined to energy,” so does Wilbur display a fondness for the beauty of energy in his own poetry. This ekphrastic poem praises the Degas ballerina, for when she pirouettes, her controlled, kinetic energy exhibits “grace,” “strain,” and “[b]eauty joined to energy”. This kinetic artwork inspires the poet’s imagination, for this painting of a spinning ballerina points toward transcendence. This vibrant image of the human body engaged in graceful movement is typical of Wilbur’s work, for he consistently praises demonstrations of kinetic energy—especially human or animal bodies in motion—in the subject matter of his poems.

Several critics have studied movement in its various manifestations in Wilbur’s work. In 1958, Francis W. Warlow wrote about Wilbur’s work in light of his contemporaries, historical context, and influences, asserting that Wilbur “seems to aspire to a moderately difficult, ambiguous, and ironic utterance which will not confound or exclude the reasonably sophisticated” (221). Warlow briefly mentions the role of “movement and change” in Wilbur’s first three collections, arguing that “Wilbur’s formal poems themselves...braided the movements of things, appearances, and thoughts” (221). Though his treatment of change and movement is brief, Warlow nonetheless notices the kinetic presence within Wilbur’s work. In 1967, Arthur E.

McGuinness also studied Wilbur's relationship to movement in two ways: first, by noting the presence of both static and kinetic art in Wilbur's ekphrastic work, and secondly, by claiming that for Wilbur, "man is movement" (319). To explain this second claim, McGuinness lists many of the "symbols and metaphors of motion" in the subject matter of Wilbur's poetry, including the "pirouetting girl dancing down the Spanish Steps ('Piazza di Spagna Early Morning'), a bunch of skittery chickens ('A Black November Turkey'), the sweep of a beacon ('The Beacon'), the unruly flight of old newspapers on the night wind ('After the Last Bulletins')," among others (319). He does not further pursue the concept that "man is movement" in Wilbur's work, but instead focuses on other aspects of the poetry. Neither of these critics, then, have used the specifically scientific concepts related the energy of motion—kinetic energy—as a critical framework for understanding Wilbur's imagery and linguistic multivalence, which is what I intend to do.

The terms of kinetic energy, potential energy, gravity, and weight are all integral to my critical framework. Understanding these concepts both in the context of the physical sciences and in the artistic setting of ballet will allow for a more comprehensive and nuanced consideration of how they operate in Wilbur's subject matter and poetics. Kinetic energy is, quite simply, "the energy that something has when it is in motion" (Petersen 18). Its counterpart is potential energy, which is "the stored energy of an object, which depends on its position rather than its motion" (13). In *Ballet Beyond Tradition*, Anna Paskevaska quotes Daniel Lewis, who provides the following definitions: "Energy is the capacity of the body to move, and *potential* energy is that capacity in its unreleased state, that is, the body on the threshold of movement. *Kinetic* energy is potential energy in motion" (63). When the dancer rests between leaps, her body has the capacity

to move, and she possesses potential energy; when she jumps, she then exhibits kinetic energy in her movement.

Potential energy is, then, the foundation out of which kinetic energy arises. Gravity, which is the pull that objects of mass (such as the Earth) have on one another, is one of the sources of potential energy. Gravitational potential energy is “the energy stored within an object due to its vertical position, or height” (Peterson 17). Quite simply, when one lifts an object, one “give[s] it the potential to move,” since if that object is released, gravity will pull it back to the Earth (17). The Earth’s gravity is what gives an object its weight, and Paskevka focuses on how dancers must use their own weight to add beauty to their movements. She argues that “[d]ancers, while striving for lightness and avoiding the appearance of succumbing to gravity, must be aware of and able to manage the weight and effort” (78). They must appear weightless but remain grounded. In ballet, weight does not disappear, nor does the dancer ignore its presence; rather, the weight is shifted in accordance with the motion, appearing in one part of the body and then in another.

The imagery of Wilbur’s poems often celebrates movement that appears to defy gravity or that uses physical weight in a surprising way. The concept of gravity is thus fundamental to Wilbur’s poetics, since in many of his poems he speaks of gravity as, simultaneously, both a scientific concept (the physical pull of the Earth) and as seriousness or solemnness (related to the adjective grave). The second definition of gravity as *gravitas* is typically opposed to the concept of levity, which can mean physical lightness or lightness of spirit (*i.e.* gaiety). The very language, then, of discussing heaviness and lightness has both physical and emotional connotations, and Wilbur makes use of both, as many of his poems explore the balance between



gravity and levity. The pun on “gravity” is thus integral to both his work and to this discussion of graceful movement.

In both ballet and in Wilbur’s poetry, moreover, there is an element of control in the exhibition of kinetic energy; Paskevka posits that “[e]nergy is stored to be released with intent, whether in a controlled flow...or a more forceful motion” (65). The dancer can move slowly or quickly, calmly or violently, but every movement is precise and deliberate. Similarly, Wilbur’s poetry is carefully crafted, almost always following a pattern of rhyme and meter. The form of the poems follows the content, shaping the ideas and the imagery into prosody that often alternates between “a controlled flow” and “a more forceful motion,” depending on the content of the lines. Paskevka further discerns that in ballet, the “body seemingly at rest is vibrant with stored energy that will manifest itself in directed motion when the potential energy is released and becomes kinetic energy” (64). In many ways, this echoes Wilbur’s aforementioned belief in the “glorious energy” that “tends to take pattern and shape” in the world. In fact, Wilbur’s celebration of the physicality of the “things of this world” often guides his poetry, leading him from things to ideas (*Collected* 307).

Wilbur is a highly philosophical and spiritual poet, yet he consistently grounds abstract concepts in concrete images, details, and characters. “What poetry does with ideas is to redeem them from abstraction and submerge them in sensibility,” according to Wilbur. “[I]t embodies them in persons and things, and surrounds them with a weather of feeling” (*Responses* 126). Wilbur’s critics have often noted the metaphysical tension between the concrete and the abstract in his work. Though the “things of this world” are distinct from the abstract world, Wilbur believes in their intrinsic interrelationship. As Cleanth Brooks states, “He does not retreat from this world and take refuge in an abstract order; rather, he accepts the things of this world as

having their own powerful reality, but a reality that reaches beyond themselves” (542). Elaine James also explains this metaphysical issue in Wilbur’s poetry precisely: “Broadly understood, Wilbur’s metaphysical vision emphasizes the world’s materiality but is tempered by hints that a greater meaning permeates and enlivens all of the world’s materiality” (237-8). The things of this world are valuable and worthy of appreciation, but they are not the entirety of reality.

For Wilbur, the spiritual permeates the profane similarly to how the abstract is often found within the concrete. His poetry often argues “against dissociate and abstracted spirituality,” as Wilbur remarks (Butts 25). Wilbur was raised Episcopalian, and though he is not a staunch church-going member, he professes that he “still ha[s] some habits from those old days” (Bilyak). The tradition of Christianity thus informs his poetry, and the religious allusions in his work are usually either explicitly or implicitly Christian. For Wilbur, the spiritual world is immanent in the earthly one, just as the realm of ideas permeates the tangible world. Many of Wilbur’s poems describe religious subjects, such as “Teresa” (*Collected* 154), “A Plain Song for Comadre” (318), and “A Simplification” (442), while others focus more on the concrete versus the abstract, such as “A World Without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness” (357) and “For the New Railway Station in Rome” (350).

Moreover, I would add that spirituality, as expressed in Wilbur’s poems, is essentially about movement: movement that goes both upward and downward. The transcendent world infuses the physical world (in a metaphorically downward motion), and the human mind and heart are often drawn in both directions: upward to heaven and downward to Earth. One of his most famous poems, “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” begins with the imagery of angels in the laundry: “The morning air is all awash with angels. // Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses, / Some are in smocks: but truly there they are” (*Collected* 307). This image, in

many ways, depicts Wilbur's spirituality. In a 1964 interview, Wilbur quips, "I can believe in angels by way of and in the laundry" (Butts 25). He later clarifies this in a 1975 interview by stating that "in effect, the angels have got to come down and dwell among us, be useful to us" (154). The soul's impulse "to refine itself too far, to escape too well, must be resisted" (153). Wilbur recognizes that some human beings may feel an impulse to raise their souls or minds to heaven (to focus on the philosophical or other intangible aspects of faith), but he also cautions against forgetting about the call to love the world.

The figurative connection between spirituality and physical movement is not without precedence. In his article "Sappho and Poetic Motion," Frederic Will focuses on the kinetic aspects of Sappho's poetry, studying how the "linguistic limitations" affect the "developing and ripening" of "the inner life," or psyche (259). He states: "There is a kind of inner kinesis in the psyche. The importance, in fact the *raison d'être*, of this kinesis is its power to dramatize certain attitudes, or constellations of feelings." He further explains that inner "motion 'upward' will often be associated with...spiritual ascension" and its opposite, "that of motion 'downward' with the notion of spiritual descent." In Sappho's poetry, he rejects this connection: "Motion upward has nothing real to do with spirituality." While I cannot question his assessment of Sappho, I believe that this use of what Will calls "ordinary" language—of words like "upward" and "downward"—can aptly be used to describe spiritual and religious happenings in Wilbur's work. The positive and negative connections, however, do not hold in Wilbur's work, for upward is not always good, and downward is not always bad. Rather, in Wilbur's work, the two work in conjunction, as will be seen in such poems as "Grace" and "Mayflies."

Wilbur is a poet of balance between ideas and things, between upward and downward motion, between the heavenly and the earthly. Wilbur himself has written about the "persistent

concerns” in his poetry, including “the proper relation between the tangible world and the intuitions of the spirit. The poems assume that such intuitions are, or may be, true; they incline, however, to favor a spirituality which is not abstracted, not dissociated and world-renouncing” (*Responses* 160). In other words, he believes that the concrete (or physical) world is distinct from the abstract (or spiritual) realm, but the latter can be found within the former. His belief in greater transcendence beyond what is seen enhances—rather than limits—his appreciation for the physical world.

Wilbur’s poetry is neither world-renouncing nor word-renouncing. In nearly all of his work—his poetry, his children’s books, his prose writing—Wilbur displays a deep fondness for words. In “Poetry and Happiness,” he writes about “a longing to possess the whole world and to praise it, or at least to feel it” (*Responses* 122). His fascination with “word-hunting and word-cherishing” is what drives his work, as he attempts to find the words in which he can describe “human life in all its fullness” (127-129). Language is central to Wilbur’s poetry, and is more than just the medium by which ideas or images are transmitted. He carefully crafts each word in his poems, and the language is quite often guided by his wit. Babette Deutsch defines wit as the “faculty that makes for metaphor by the perception of likeness in unlike things,” further declaring that “[w]it is now admired as a sign of the poet’s power to relate incongruities and so give a fresh understanding of complexities” (194-195). Wilbur’s poetry is ripe with “fresh understanding[s] of complexities,” and this perception of complexity is often expressed through wordplay and through figurative language.

Wordplay is the witty playing around with words, drawing upon the ambiguities of both sound and meaning. Puns—defined loosely as a play on words with similar sounds but different

meanings—are one of the main types of wordplay, and they often depend upon both the denotations and connotations of words. As Babette Deutsch observes:

The connotations of language thicken its ambiguities and also give it greater emotional weight, so that they may enrich its value for the poet. The pun is vulgar to the vulgus; its many-faceted sparkle has always delighted the poet, from Shakespeare to Richard Wilbur. (37)

Linguistic ambiguities often add to the “emotional weight” of Wilbur’s poetry, and the “many-faceted sparkle” of his puns lend both delight and a multi-layered understanding to his work.

When one reads a pun—or a word with multiple meanings—then one has to move back and forth cognitively between the different meanings. In this sense, wordplay, especially puns, also have a kinetic aspect due to the cognitive motion they inspire. One could perhaps even go so far as to figuratively describe the inherent meanings of words as potential energy, which becomes kinetic through poetry, through the movement of the mind’s eye over the verse. In *The Pun Also Rises*, John Pollack discusses readers’ and listeners’ cognitive responses to puns noting how “puns require the brain to maintain multiple meanings of a word simultaneously;” furthermore, puns often require “the listener to reevaluate the intended meaning of the entire phrase” (42). In other words, the interpretation of a pun can affect the meaning of the entire line, or even the entire poem. Indeed, this potentiality for various meanings is an aspect of the controlled dynamism of Wilbur’s poetry, for each word (*i.e.* each pun) is chosen carefully to enhance the interplay of ambiguous meanings within each poem.

Many critics have written extensively about Wilbur’s wordplay. In *Wilbur’s Poetry: Music in Scattering Time*, Bruce Michelson focuses on “Wilbur’s astonishing use of language—especially his famous wordplay—because that use in itself may be as daring an experiment in

poetry as we have seen in the past four decades” (36). He argues that his “wordplay seems to be the essence of his imaginative transcendence of this world, as well as his reconciliation, such as it is, *with* the world. If we cannot understand this, the seriousness of Wilbur’s wordplay, we cannot appreciate what he is doing” (36-37). Michelson connects the underlying metaphysical tensions to the wordplay on the page, arguing that the “seriousness of Wilbur’s wordplay” encapsulates Wilbur’s fascination with the physical reality of the world, as well as his “imaginative transcendence” in which his poetry leaves the physical world and enters the world of abstract thoughts.

Similarly, Gary Ciuba also argues that Wilbur’s use of wordplay “suggests the connections between the material and the spiritual worlds” (59-60). In other words, “by relying on puns, metaphors, and paradoxes to multiply meaning,” Wilbur is better able to use language’s complexities and depth to explore his persistent concerns about the world, in its physicality and transcendence. Hecht also discerns the serious significance of wordplay in Wilbur’s work:

His puns are serious and serviceable, and only occasionally comic... It was this sort of ambiguity and multivalenced power of words that led Tolstoy to his impatient dismissal of *King Lear* and his assertion that Shakespeare was ‘only playing with words.’ But, in a deeply serious way, that is actually what all good poets do: words are their only instruments to convey what is not easily conveyed by words alone. (28)

Hecht is right that “playing with words” is the “deeply serious” work of a good poet. Wordplay adds depth to the poetry, and allowing readers to comprehend varying levels of meaning at once. As Hecht notes, a poet must “convey” meaning “by words alone,” and so a brief look into Wilbur’s approach to language is key to understanding his wordplay.

For Wilbur, words are intrinsically connected to the objects, people, and ideas they represent. Gary Ciuba notes Wilbur's delight in describing the things of the world in words: "Wilbur writes out of a basic faith in language as a means to come to terms with the *res* of reality and to reveal its transcendent significance" (49). Nevertheless, he notes that Wilbur's "logocentric order" is tempered by his "[articulation of] a long tradition of skepticism that has questioned his linguistic confidence" (52). Though words cannot fully capture the world, language can intimate a wholeness that extends beyond itself. Ciuba connects this tension within Wilbur's thought—his faith that words can capture the world (at least in part) and his acknowledgment in the limitations of words—to the "tension between the actual and the ideal" (52). Indeed, Wilbur commonly contemplates how words can, in many ways, capture the world in language and how they can point to a reality beyond themselves, without ever fully encompassing the world or the entirety of reality. He knowingly—and self-consciously—works with a limited medium, one which cannot fully intimate the complexities of life, but he stretches the medium of language, drawing upon its potentialities, including puns and other types of wordplay.

Furthermore, puns are similar to metaphors and similes in that they allow the poet to talk about two separate things simultaneously, connecting two or more meanings to each other. To speak of figurative language specifically, then, Wilbur's use of metaphors and similes sets the mind into motion. The reader must navigate the various meanings of a metaphor, fully exploring both its literal meaning and its implications. Anthony Hecht, in his article "Master of Metaphor," praises Wilbur for his "kinetic imagination that is rare among poets, as well as an unusually rich and fertile gift for metaphor" (23). Hecht concludes his article with a powerful attestation to Wilbur's art: "[T]hroughout Wilbur's poetry we are accustomed to finding this rare quality [of

nobility], usually joined to wit, good humor, grace, and modesty, and a kind of physical zest or athletic dexterity that is, so far as I know, unrivaled” (32). Hecht connects what he deems Wilbur’s “kinetic imagination” to his “fertile gift for metaphor,” noting their qualities of wit and grace, among others. Certainly, Wilbur often uses metaphorical language to connect ideas to things, ideas to ideas, and things to things, since metaphor is “the highest voltage kind of comparison,” as he stated in a 1968 interview (Butts 53). In many ways, then, studying his metaphors aids an understanding of the philosophical balance between the abstract and the concrete, or in other terms, the spiritual and the earthly in his work. Additionally, his metaphors and similes often rely upon kinetic images to enhance the energy of his poetry. For example, in his poem “Mayflies,” which I will later discuss, he compares the movement of insects to the leaping of ballet dancers, thus joining a moving subject to energetic imagery.

Overall, I argue that Wilbur’s poetry exhibits kinetic energy not only in its subject matter, but also in its witty wordplay and metaphors; furthermore, studying these kinetic aspects of his poetry elucidates the frequent tempering of gravity with levity within his work, as well as the metaphysical tensions which underlie his poetry. “But enough of that: the ideas of any poet, when reduced to prose statement, sound banal, and mine are no exception,” Wilbur proclaims. “You know, to talk about poetry with a capital ‘P’ can be very delusive. One should talk about *poems*” (*Responses* 160; Butts 38). Indeed, as I discuss poems ranging from *The Beautiful Changes* of 1947 to *Anterooms* of 2010, I will attempt to explore the aforementioned topics of kinetic energy, gravity, wit, wordplay, and metaphor as they appear in individual poems.



## 2. “Juggler” and “Grace”: Kinetic Energy as Subject Matter

Wilbur’s fascination with controlled, seemingly effortless movement is found in his work as early as his first two collections of poetry, *The Beautiful Changes* (1947) and *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950). In the latter, *Ceremony*, the poem “Juggler” is an especially clear and distilled poem with a display of kinetic energy as its subject matter. In “Juggler,” the poet takes readers on the same path as the juggler’s “five red balls” (*Collected* 370). Readers begin on the Earth, pondering the philosophical nature of gravity and complacency. They are soon lifted into excitement and wonder as the juggler performs his bright sky-blue and red tricks. The balls, brooms, and plates spin through the air! Yet the poem does not leave its readers in such a whirring state, for they land gently with the poem as the show ends and the balls, broom, and plate return to rest. “Juggler” is a thus poem with two layers, the first being a vivid depiction of an impressive juggling show, and the second being a meditation on the human habit of taking the world for granted.

Formally, “Juggler” contains five sestets and it alternates between iambic pentameter and trimeter. Each stanza begins with three lines of five feet, then shortens to two lines of three feet, before returning to the last line of five feet. The line lengths thus resemble the up-and-down of a juggling ball. Very few lines in the poem follow a regular iambic meter, as most lines are heavily substituted with anapests or trochees. Despite the frequent substitutions, the poem maintains its basic rhythm of stresses (5, 5, 5, 3, 3, 5) in each of its stanzas, keeping a rhythm which parallels the stomping of feet and the beating of the drum that accompanies this juggler’s show. Within each stanza, too, the rhyme scheme is ABCBAC, and in many ways this intricate pattern resembles the pattern that juggling balls make in the air, revolving around each other.

The poem begins with the image of a bouncing ball slowly coming to rest—“A ball will bounce; but less and less”—and connects this to the earth’s “brilliance” fading in the human heart. In other words, the more familiar the world becomes, the more human beings tend to forget its wonder. As Brooks observes: “Occasionally people need to be shocked out of their fastidiousness by the loud and solidly real things” (544). Indeed, “Juggler” aims to shock its readers “out of their fastidiousness” by its close attention to the “solidly real” display. The philosophical core of the poem has thus been established, and the following sentence contains wordplay that solidifies the poem’s intent: “It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls / To shake our gravity up” (*Collected* 370). The most important word here is “gravity,” as it is a pun with two meanings: gravity as a force of nature and gravity as seriousness and emotional heaviness.

Just as the juggling balls are affected by Earth’s gravitational pull, so too are human beings often affected by excessive seriousness, which in Wilbur’s world often weighs people down and makes them oblivious to brilliance. Thus enters his vivid depiction of the juggler’s act:

Whee, in the air

The balls roll round, wheel on his wheeling hands,

Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres

Grazing his finger ends,

Cling to their courses there,

Swinging a small heaven about his ears.

The repetition of sounds and the frequent alliteration (“Whee...wheel on his wheeling hands”) in the second stanza linguistically speed and excite the reader. Breaking from iambic meter, the lines begin to start with stressed syllables followed by unstressed ones (*e.g.*, “Learning,”

“Grazing,” “Cling to,” “Swinging”), as if with each line the juggling was throwing another ball up into the air. The movement of the red balls creates a “small heaven” in the air, and it is in this kinetic energy where the magic of the show occurs, on both literal and metaphorical levels. In fact, the word “heaven” in line twelve connects the show to the human heart again, for the next stanza begins, “But a heaven is easier made of nothing at all / Than the earth regained.” This is a new facet to his thought: it is easier to create a new heaven (a place of lightness, without gravity) from nothingness than it is to see the earth in fresh eyes and to lose the gravity of complacency.

In fact, the juggler’s show is so wondrous because it uses physical objects in such a way that they appear to be transformed from matter into energy during the show. The audience no longer notices the earthly aspects of the objects, but rather their transcendent motion. The arc of the entire poem, however, demonstrates that it is the “earth regained” that makes up the reality of life, and one must recognize that the things of this world are the potential building material of a heaven, as the juggler used earthly objects to create this display. This is a gentle foreshadowing of how the audience must return to “the earth regained” when the show ends, once more recognizing the objects as material, physical, earthly.

Before the poem’s end, though, the juggler renews his kinetic energy with a new trick, trading the five balls “for a broom, a plate, a table.” The asyndeton here speeds the reader into the next stanza, which begins with the interjection “Oh,” thus paralleling the first trick’s “Whee,” in line seven. The reader is transported into the moment:

Oh, on his toe the table is turning, the broom’s  
Balancing up on his nose, and the plate whirls  
On the tip of the broom! Damn, what a show, we cry:  
The boys stamp, and the girls

Shriek, and the drum booms

And all comes down and he bows and says good-bye.

Again, the alliteration (*e.g.*, “toe...table...turning”) and the vivid descriptions create a world of excitement, and Wilbur invites the reader into the audience with the pronoun “we” and the lack of quotation marks around “Damn, what a show.” The reader reciting the poem aloud indeed becomes part of the event, joining with the speaker and the other boys and girls who are emotionally transported by the juggler’s energy. But this kinesis does not even last a full stanza, for already in the last line “all comes down,” both physically and emotionally. Exit juggler.

The juggler is no longer an abstract, “sky-blue” performer, but he gains human feeling and weakness as he is “tired now.” The broom, which was created for the purpose of sweeping floors rather than spinning in the heavens, “stands / In the dust again,” the dust which it is, paradoxically, originally intended to dispel. The table, traditionally the center of household use, is again part of the “daily dark” of quotidian life, and the plate again rests on a table, where it belongs. Where does that leave the audience and, by extension, the reader? Like the ball that bounces “less and less” and the earth that “settles and is forgot,” the movement toward the earth and the ceased motion is a return to *gravity*, in both senses. Why does Wilbur bring the show to an end so quickly? In many ways, the suddenness of the ascent into exhibition and descent back into normalcy emphasizes the fleeting nature of “brilliance,” especially brilliance that stems from a temporary and constructed display. The final stanza focuses, then, both on the wheeling of the balls in the air and on the settling of objects due to gravity. Yet Wilbur does not let the readers forget the show they have just witnessed, returning again to the juggler: “For him we batter our hands / Who has won for once over the world’s weight.” Again, the reader is included through

the pronoun “we,” and as readers, we are invited to applaud with the speaker of the poem in gratitude and awe of the juggler.

The motion of the juggler’s act is “wheeling” and “turning” and “[s]winging,” and though this may sound chaotic, he nonetheless carefully controls the kinetic energy of the balls, broom, plate, and table with incredible skill (*Collected* 370). The energy Wilbur favors seems to be just as controlled as his poems, which are written more often in traditional poetic forms rather than in free verse. This delightful energy requires both “grace” and “strain” in order to keep its balance: “The grace is there, / But strain as well is plain to see” in the poem’s carefully crafted form, to borrow phrases from “Museum Piece” (365). There is still an element of control over the movement, and poet parallels juggler: both use a medium (in the juggler’s case, objects such as a broom, and in the poet’s case, language itself) which often loses brilliance through daily utilitarian use, and both remind their audience of their medium’s more extraordinary capabilities.

In this poem, Wilbur acknowledges the seriousness of the world and tempers this gravity with a dynamic levity, especially through his use of wordplay and metaphor. For as Brooks states, “Wilbur knows how to be lighthearted and not at all solemn in addressing the most serious human problems” (550). Wilbur writes about a juggler whose job it is to “shake our gravity up;” yet it is also the poet who, through his playful celebration of words and world, intrigues and delights the reader (*Collected* 370). For the juggler and for the poet, “we batter our hands / Who has won for once over the world's weight.” Wilbur writes against both the tendency to become too complacent with the world (taking it for granted), as well as the opposite inclination to entirely abandon the world (attempting to ignore its reality by creating a heaven “of nothing at all”). Both the poet and the juggler must take the weight of the world and transform this gravity into art. In many ways, the controlled energy of the juggling show rekindles an appreciation for

the brilliance of the world in its audience, and Wilbur's similarly controlled yet energetic poem seeks the same effect for its readers.

Wilbur praises the juggler's ability to use physical movement to astonish his audience, and he also admires the same skill in ballet dancers. As Paskevaska observes, ballet dancers transform stored energy into kinetic energy and they use weight as part of a graceful and seemingly weightless motion. A discussion of ballet is never far from the world of Wilbur's poetry, for he includes ballet dancers in many of his poems, including "L'Etoile," "Museum Piece," and "Grace." While the first two see the ballerinas through paintings by Edgar Degas, the third—"Grace"—honors the ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, especially his acrobatic ability to perform leaps and jumps. Found in Wilbur's first collection *The Beautiful Changes* (1947), "Grace" is one of Wilbur's more intricate poems, requiring of the reader mental acrobatics like the "neural grace in Hamlet's head" (*Collected* 455). Peter Harris writes of Wilbur's "artfulness," noting that many of his "dazzling" poems "will astonish us...with their Nijinskian or Michael Jordan-like air time, their liberating sense of difficulties overcome, [and] their deceptively effortless articulation of ineluctable intricacy" (n. pag.). Indeed, I think this description applies to this poem which attempts to articulate the beauty of graceful action in its many manifestations.

Formally, "Grace" is composed of six stanzas of five lines each. In both its meter and its rhyme, the poem sets a standard, but only to subvert expectations. In terms of meter, the poem seems to alternate fluidly between iambic, dactylic, and anapestic pentameter, with so many substitutions that it feels more like accentual verse (with five stresses per line). The first stanza, for example, follows an iambic pattern in its first and last line, but the fourth stanza has only one line that starts with an iamb, for the following four all begin with a stressed syllable. The

exceptions are the last lines of each stanza, which are in iambic trimeter, though so heavily substituted that they resemble accentual meter (with three stresses per line). In the last stanza, the lines, “To be unchecked / Is needful then,” seem to be speaking to the form itself, since as the poem reaches its conclusion, even the accentual consistency of five and three becomes very loose, with the third line of that stanza containing six stressed syllables and only four unstressed syllables. The rhyme scheme, however, is less “unchecked,” following the pattern: AABCB CCDED, and so forth, with the first two lines of each stanza a couplet, the third line rhyming with the last, and the fourth line linking to the beginning of the next stanza. This pattern is broken, however, in the third stanza. One expects the stanza to rhyme with “food,” since that is the end-rhyme of the fourth line of stanza two; instead, the rhyme begins with “flings” and “wings.” Except for this break from the pattern, the rest of the rhyme scheme is regular, if complex.

Thematically, the poem’s epigraph provides the basis and the inspiration for the poem:

“‘The young lambs bound As to the tabor’s sound.’ They toss and toss; it is as if it were the earth that flung them, not themselves. It is the pitch of graceful agility when we think that.” — G. M. Hopkins, *Notebooks* (455)

The poem as a whole is an homage to this “graceful agility,” as it is found in displays of physical movement, scholastic work, and characters’ psychology. Inspired by Hopkins’ appreciations of Wordsworth’s description of lambs, Wilbur begins the poem with “little sheep” who are “[s]o active they seem passive.” Their movements seem to defy gravity, and they leap in the fields in such an effortless manner that they seem to be exerting no effort at all; their actions are similar to the “marvelous midair pause” of Nijinsky in his leaps.

One will not be surprised that a poem inspired by a passage by Hopkins has religious connotations, and indeed the images of the ovine and terpsichorean agility inspire the assertion that “flesh made word / Is grace’s revenue” (*Collected* 455). This is a mirroring of the biblical “word made flesh” used by John to describe Christ’s Incarnation, which is when God’s divine Word takes on human flesh; but in this poem, the phrase is “flesh made word” and so a descent becomes an ascent: the physical world displays and aspires to spiritual properties. Yet what does the second half of the phrase—“grace’s revenue”—mean? To speak broadly, grace is the outpouring of divine love into the physical world, and revenue is income that is received from an investment. Thus, “grace’s revenue” would be something of value or benefit that is gained from the investment of grace in the world. This “flesh made word,” this pleasing physical movement that approximates the divine, is thus a product (dare I say a gift?) of grace, which is the origin of the divine in the physical world. The logic is thus a bit circular: grace brings the divine to earth, and the leaps of Nijinsky and the sheep display that grace and thus elevate the physical, bringing it closer to the divine. Wordplay is also present here: the everyday use of “graceful” as an adjective meaning elegant and agile, and “graceful” as an adjective that means pertaining to theological grace (*Collected* 455). Both meanings of “grace” are present in this poem, and this pun further unites the physical depictions of the poem’s subject matter with its deeper, spiritual explorations. Like the audience who applauds the juggler for “[s]winging a small heaven about his ears,” the speaker of the poem—and, by extension, the readers—are reminded of the presence of the divine on earth through the graceful agility of the performers (*Collected* 370).

In the subsequent stanzas, the content broadens from leaps to other impressive displays of acrobatics. The speaker praises “the dining-car waiter’s absurd / Acrobacy” on a shaking train, though he notes that his movement is caused not by art nor by natural impulse, but by a need to



deliver food to hungry diners (*Collected* 455). Through intricate wordplay, he calls the movement “habitude, if not pure / Hebetude.” *Habitude* comes from *habit*, and is thus a customary and repeated way of acting. *Hebetude*, on the other hand, is the “condition or state of being blunt or dull; dullness, bluntness, obtuseness, lethargy” (“Hebetude, n.”). Through these two words, this slant rhyme separated only by a few letters, Wilbur seems to suggest a paradox in which the waiter’s movement is art which lifts the viewer out of the everyday, yet is also part of the “dullness, bluntness” of quotidian life. In other words, actions of hebetude—such as serving innumerable meals—make the present moment a blur of forgetfulness; at the same time, when one takes the time to notice the “[a]crobacy—tipfingered tray like a wind-besting bird” of such otherwise-forgettable action, then even serving food on a train can become a launchpad for the imagination (*Collected* 455). Michelson argues that, for Wilbur, imagination has the ability to “make sense of experience” (in other words, to clarify the physical world) and to reach the transcendent world that exists outside of our senses. He states: “For Wilbur those moments, when imaginative engagement with the world sets off a flash like a discovery *in* the world, give cause for keeping faith alive” (42). Kinetic actions of which the imagination can both make sense and transcend are actions of discovery and faith in a transcendent world.

Leaving the waiter, the speaker returns to Nijinsky and to the lambs, noting how the ability to “loiter in air” is intrinsic – and almost obligatory – for both. The lambs are paradoxically “constrained to bound,” which suggests a limitation to their grace; they are limited because their grace is physical (they cannot fly nor leap tall buildings), whereas the grace that comes from the human mind or imagination does not have such bodily limits. Thus the topic changes from physical leaps to mental ones, and the speaker of the poem directs the reader to “[c]onsider instead / The intricate neural grace in Hamlet’s head.” Hamlet is notoriously

occupied with mental acrobatics, as he spends most of the play *thinking*, and Shakespeare gives the reader hints of his “intricate neural grace” through his dialogue and soliloquies. Thus, the poem moves from physical to neural grace, though not all cerebral dexterity is created equal. Wilbur clarifies that mental “grace not barbarous implies a choice / Of courses,” for the mind must be able to navigate various pathways of thought. While sophisticated language—“a lingo of leaps-in-air”—may seem an impressive feat, if the ideas expressed have not been weighed and considered, then the “scholars’ stutters” may lose the reader’s respect. The poet thus celebrates intellectual leaps and jumps, but also cautions against scholarship which loses the “neural grace” of art.

The poem’s final stanza, however, which encapsulates Wilbur’s approach to grace, balance, and movement. Not only are the imagistic aspects intricate and stunning, but the statement that Wilbur is making here is an elegant and thoughtful end to a complex poem:

Even fraction-of-a-second action is not wrecked  
By a graceful still reserve. To be unchecked  
Is needful then: choose, challenge, jump, poise, run...  
Nevertheless, the praiseful, graceful soldier  
Shouldn’t be fired by his gun. (*Collected* 456)

Formally, the language resembles the “fraction-of-a-second action” that is described, as the asyndeton of “choose, challenge, jump, poise, run...” speeds the reader through the list of verbs, and creates the effect of congeries, in which the verbs are emphasized through their close proximity to one another. The ellipsis at the end of the line makes the reader feel as though this fast-paced list could continue ceaselessly. The metaphor at the end of the soldier being fired by his gun, rather than firing his gun, adds an acute and weighty image to the idea being expressed.

In fact, the soldier firing his gun is an example of “fraction-of-a-second action [that] is not wrecked / By a graceful still reserve.” When soldiers are in combat, they must perform their actions with great immediacy, but that does not mean that they cannot also exhibit grace and thought when they act. They must be in control of the gun’s energy, rather than the opposite. At the same time, however, soldiers in battle are not typically described as “praiseful, graceful,” and Wilbur knows that, serving in World War II himself. Thus, there is deep irony here which bears further study in comparison to his other war-related poems.

### 3. “An Event”: The Intricacies of Metaphor

Both “Grace” and “Juggler” thus praise physical and mental acrobatics, and in many ways, Wilbur’s poetry enacts the “neural grace” mentioned in “Grace,” especially in his use of metaphorical language and wordplay. Both analogies and puns cause readers to see the relationship of otherwise unrelated concepts. When the juggler creates a “small heaven” about his ears, the reader mentally pictures the juggling balls swinging like the orbit of the planets; the connection is thus made between the two ideas, and both images—of the show and of the celestial sphere—are present in the mind. Similarly, when the poet applauds the juggler who has “won for once over the world’s weight”—weight, in this case, being a pun for both physical weight of the broom and plate (the pull of gravity being defied by the juggler’s balancing and spinning) and emotional weight of the world (the seriousness of existence)—the reader connects two disparate ideas and sees the similarities and differences between them. Thus, both metaphorical language and wordplay create mental energy. While there are many poems that exhibit Wilbur’s wit and his penchant for metaphor, “An Event” exhibits both a meditation on language and metaphor and an appreciation for athletic dexterity.

In “An Event” from *Things of This World* (1956), Wilbur turns to one of his favorite topics: birds. Birds appear again and again in Wilbur’s poetry (e.g., “All These Birds,” “A Black November Turkey,” “A Barred Owl,” “The Writer,” “Still, Citizen Sparrow,” “Praise in Summer,” and “Flying”). Whereas “Juggler” and “Grace” praise a single person or animal in motion, “An Event” instead praises the movement of a flock of birds, who form a single ‘body’ that dances through the air. The poem is a celebration of the movement of the flock of “small black birds” as they fly through the heavens, making patterns in the sky (*Collected* 347). This poem is beautiful and powerful in two main ways: its metaphorical and dazzling description of

the birds in motion, and its contemplation of poetry and language. While the latter points to the inadequacy of the former, it does not diminish its beauty nor its pleasantness, for the poet continues to give descriptions and metaphors to the event he is witnessing. “An Event” is a poem about the attempt of poetry to set the world down in words, and while language is ultimately unable fully to capture the world, it is nonetheless a pleasing and worthwhile pursuit.

The poem’s structure is similar to that of “Juggler” in that it is composed of sestets, though “An Event” has four stanzas whereas “Juggler” has five. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is ABACB. All of the lines are roughly iambic pentameter, though Wilbur himself has noticed the “looseness of [his] pentameters” (Stitt). He states that “in contrast to many poets I pay little heed to the decasyllabic norm. . . . I start talking the poem to myself, and I wait to see what rhythmic lengths the poem naturally wants to fall into.” This observation is appropriate for “An Event,” for though the poem often subscribes to the decasyllabic line, the meter is quite loose, as befits a poem about a speaker who is slowly coming to terms with language and its limitations.

The beginning of the poem attempts to capture the birds’ mesmerizing and kinetic movement in words. The speaker begins with a simile: “As if a cast of grain leapt back to the hand” (*Collected* 347). Their flight reminds him of gravity-defying grain that flies back into a sewer’s hand rather than merely out of it; this particular image is possible only in language and imagination since grain cannot defy gravity (grain falls from hand to earth, and does not levitate back from earth to hand). Through this image of impossibility, Wilbur ascribes an almost magical quality to the birds’ movement. This ability to appear to defy gravity makes the flock of birds—like the dancer’s leaps, the lambs’ gambols, or the juggler’s plates and balls—a subject of praise and celebration. The birds use their weight and their bodies to create a spectacular show in

the air, and I am reminded once more of Paskevskas dancers who, “avoiding the appearance of succumbing to gravity, must be aware of and able to manage the weight and effort” (78). The birds move with “unanimous consent” and, alighting from “the pale trees and fields,” make their way across the sky (*Collected* 347).

The next stanza begins with a new analogy: “What is an individual thing? They roll / Like a drunken fingerprint across the sky!” This image “is breathtakingly vivid, accurate, and most astonishingly, *in motion*,” as Hecht observes (24). The speaker compares observing their flight to watching a drunken person smear his finger across the sky, his movements enigmatic to those watching. The birds “convene at some command,” though the source of that command is inscrutable to the viewer. The speaker emphasizes the autonomy of the group of birds and the inability of the viewer fully to understand their rationality of flight and movement. Interestingly, at this point in the poem, the speaker does not attempt to personify the birds; rather, the birds’ motion is described, and he acknowledges that he cannot grasp their intentions. He does not yet give the birds feelings or human agency when he describes their murmuration. In this way, he respects the birds as being part of an external reality, respecting the boundaries of subjective and objective reality. Instead, he applies his own thoughts and feelings about the birds to his description of them. In other words, the speaker of “An Event” clearly separates the external reality of the birds from his own subjective experiencing of them.

The birds are personified, nevertheless, in the second stanza, but only when they become agents within the poet’s mind. In the second stanza, the speaker qualifies the metaphorical language that he had used in the first stanza to offer an alternative account of the birds:

Or so I give the image to my soul  
Until, as if refusing to be caught

In any singular vision of my eye

Or in the nets and cages of my thought,

the birds disappear from his sight. Interestingly, the metaphorical language extends from the birds to the poet's mind itself. When he writes of "the nets and cages of my thought," it is as though the human mind's attempt to ensnare the birds in words is akin to capturing them in a physical net. Wild animals are known physically to resist being captured, and thus the speaker assigns this desire for freedom of motion to the birds in a metaphorical sense. Wilbur describes the birds as intentionally trying to escape his linguistic ensnarement, though the words "*as if* refusing to be caught" [emphasis mine] show his recognition that he imposes these intentions on them. Thus, the personification is still intentionally within his subjectivity, ascribed to the image of the birds within his mind and not to the reality of the birds in the sky, yet the line between subjective and objective, and between physical and mental, is continually explored through the self-consciously assigned metaphors in this poem.

In "An Event," Wilbur switches between physical and mental (*i.e.*, imaginative) vehicles and tenors in his metaphors. The first few metaphors use both tenors and vehicles based in the physical world. In the first lines, the "small black birds" are a tenor based in the physical world and both the "cast of grain" and the "drunken fingerprint" are vehicles that use images based in the physical world. The "nets and cages of my thought," however, uses an intangible tenor ("thought") and a physical vehicle ("nets and cages"). The tenors and the vehicles fluctuate between the subjective (inside the speaker's mind) and the objective (the world outside) as the poem progresses, and this emphasizes how the external and internal world of the poem become more and more deeply entwined. In his typically philosophical fashion, Wilbur is both establishing a binary—between internal thoughts and external objects—and challenging,

complicating, and exploring the boundary between the two realms. The figurative language of the poem provides a medium by which to do this, and the energy of the tenors and the vehicles entrances readers, bringing them into the poem and guiding them through these complex philosophical explorations.

Indeed, as the poem progresses, the poem becomes even more focus on the act of thinking itself. At the end of the third stanza, the poet writes that though the birds still exist somewhere out of his sight, they remain in control of his imagination: “They fly me still, and steal my thoughts away.” Instead of capturing the birds, the birds have captured him. As the birds leave, the poet is left “in this place / Shaping these images to make them stay.” By fixing the birds in language, he gives them a permanence that their flight does not possess. Their murmuration was brief and once-in-a-lifetime (literally, this particular event will only occur once), but the poet’s description of them in words may endure. As Gary Ciuba notes in his analysis of this poem, “The typical mutability of Wilbur’s world has been briefly given the permanence of language” (54). Though Wilbur published this poem in 1956, I read it now in 2015, and I often recall the exact words of the poem whenever I see starlings take flight.

Yet the speaker is correct about his inability fully to capture the event in words; not only do the birds fly away from him physically, but words cannot put time and space onto the page. There is, unfortunately, no flock of black birds arising from the black ink of the poetry collection sitting on my desk, but only words on a page attempting to imagine the birds’ motion in static language. Hecht astutely posits that “the theme of this poem [is] the delicate and necessarily imperfect attempt at an equation between the exterior world and the human faculties that apprehend and try to ‘render’ it” (35). Even though the poet is unable fully to ensnare the birds



“in the nets and cages” of language, he is nevertheless pleased with his ability to transcribe even a little bit of their wonder to the page:

Delighted with myself and with the birds,  
I set them down and give them leave to be.  
It is by words and the defeat of words,  
Down sudden vistas of the vain attempt,  
That for a flying moment one may see  
By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt.

The poet feels delight at his perception of the kinetic display of the birds, and at his own graceful ability to describe their flight. This is similar to the delight felt by the juggler’s applauding audience or by Wordsworth as he observed the lambs. Along with this feeling of pleasure, the poet still fluctuates between activity and passivity. He actively wants to “set them down,” but he must passively “give them leave to be.” Earlier in the poem, too, the poet becomes passive and the birds active: “They fly me still, and steal my thoughts away.” In essence, they have more power over his mind than his mind has over them. He is the *namer* of the reality he sees, yet the birds are external and autonomous to his naming.

While this “defeat of words” may seem negative, Wilbur transforms it into something positive (*Collected* 347). For it is in what words both can and cannot do that “one may see / By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt.” Put quite simply by Ciuba, “Words attest to a surfeit that they cannot fully express” (54). Words—especially when they are used in figurative language—enable the poet to create imaginative images beyond what is merely physically seen, thus adding greater depth and dimension to his experience; they also allow for greater permanence than pure observation. As noted before in “The Juggler,” Wilbur often celebrates

art's ability to "shake our gravity up," to help its readers or viewers to notice the details of existence and to see the world in new ways. This careful attention to the role of the poet and this self-consciousness regarding the act of writing of poetry continues through his entire oeuvre.

Certainly, many of Wilbur's poems can be read as being about poetry, language, and the poetic process. In "The Reflexive Art of Richard Wilbur," Reibetanz argues that nearly all of "Wilbur's poems are reflexive acts of meditation on their own essential nature" (592). Each poem contains two levels: the first being the explicit content of the poem, and the second being metapoetic reflection. Thus, according to Reibetanz, Wilbur's poems are essentially polysemous, providing layers of meanings for the reader to dissect. Wilbur writes in this reflexive manner "because reflexivity implicitly allows for a more open-ended and polysemous world to read" (612). While I do not subscribe to his claim that nearly all of Wilbur's poems are metapoetic, I agree that many of his poems—especially ones such as "An Event," which Reibetanz also analyzes—convey a strong sense of the poet's linguistic preference and his poetic process. In fact, Reibetanz's argument strengthens the relationship between Wilbur's kinetic subject matter and his energetic, multivalenced verse, for if Wilbur's subject matter, in general, is so closely tied to metapoetic expression, then it follows that if many of his poems are about actions of movement, then perhaps writing poetry is an inherently energetic action.

The idea of motion is thus also present also in the writing and reading of poetry. Wilbur himself expresses the idea that poetry "represent[s] the movement of the mind and heart toward understanding and clarification" (Butts 42). Poetry "has to be discovery rather than the celebration of received ideas." A poem is thus a journey of the mind toward discovery, and this journey is expressed metaphorically as "movement of the mind and heart," emphasizing that the mental and emotional aspects of writing and reading poetry are kinetic. Indeed, Reibetanz posits

that while writing, the poet—namely, Wilbur—comes to better understand or articulate his sense of the world around him through an intellectual journey which parallels the physical journeys that take place in the subject matter of many of Wilbur’s poems (*e.g.*, “The Ride”).

Similarly, John Gery describes “the experience of reading a poem by Wilbur” as the feeling of being “pulled simultaneously in the directions of anxiety and consolation, toward both despair and hope, to be ultimately deposited somewhere in between, which is where [he] always was, only [he] did not know it so well before having read the poem” (113). It is this journey (taken by both poet and reader) through anxiety to consolation which produces the balanced tension in each poem. The metaphysical tensions, the focus on the abilities and limitations of language, and the “gracefully formal and deliberately balanced work” (Gery 113) are still present in Wilbur’s more recent works, such as *Mayflies* (2000), *New Poems* (2004), and *Anterooms* (2010). While one could look for changes in Wilbur’s poetry over time, studying the notable consistencies in his work from 1947 to 2010 will provide a deeper understanding about the role of movement, energy, and balance in his verse.

#### 4. “Mayflies” and *Anterooms*: The Energy of Wilbur’s Later Work

With published work spanning over six decades, Richard Wilbur is indeed a prolific poet. In many ways, Wilbur’s fascination with kinetic subjects and with the role of the poet continues in his 2000 collection *Mayflies: New Poems and Translations*. In the title poem “Mayflies,” the speaker watches “a mist of flies / In their quadrillions rise” from the forest, and he calls them “lifelong dancers” (*Collected* 36). Similarly to “An Event,” the speaker of “Mayflies” watches the movement of animals in the sky, and he meditates on their dance and on his duty to capture this experience in words. Ultimately, their movement and energy remind the speaker of the religious (specifically, Christian) underpinnings of his life and world.

The poem is composed of three stanzas of eight lines each, with a rhyme scheme of ABBACDCD. In this regard, each stanza is similar to a truncated Petrarchan sonnet, as the ABBA parallels half of the octave and the CDCD mirrors a shortened sestet. The meter is iambic, and each stanza follows the pattern of two lines in pentameter, one in trimeter, two in pentameter, one in dimeter, and the last two in pentameter. In the *Collected Poems 1943-2004*, the shorter lines (of trimeter and dimeter) are also indented so that they look centered rather than left-aligned. This lack of uniformity in both the left and right margins thus imitates the kinetic energy of the dancing and swarming of flies.

The first stanza sets the scene: a “somber forest” as the sun sets (*Collected* 36). As the sun moves down, the “quadrillions rise” up into the air. The speaker watches as the air becomes animated with the “sudden glittering” of mayflies, and likens the arrival of the flies to that of “a crowd / Of stars appear[ing] / Through a brief gap in black and driven cloud.” The energy is palpable, and the sheer number of insects is emphasized through the word “quadrillions” and through the comparison to stars, which in a dark forest cannot be counted by the human eye. The

metaphorical language has already begun, and this stellar simile gives way to a metaphor as the speaker describes “their great round-dance.” This motif of dance continues in the second stanza, where Wilbur employs ballet terminology: “In *entrechats* each fluttering insect there / Rose two steep yards in air, / Then slowly floated down to climb once more.” An *entrechat* is a “straight up and down jump” in which the “legs cross rapidly in the air” (Paskevskaja 160). The quick, fluttering ascents and descents of the mayflies remind the speaker of ballet dancers in *entrechats*. What began as a “ragged patch of glow” in the first stanza has become a veritable performance, a “manifold / And figured scene” before the speaker’s eye (*Collected* 36). Like the birds in “An Event,” the individual members seem to form a single pattern of unity as they dance through the sky.

He compares the mayflies not only to dancers, but also to “weavers of some cloth of gold,” as though their shimmering movement forms a piece of golden art. The speaker personifies the mayflies, attempting to make them more human, and thus more like himself. He blurs the line between his own subjective, internal experience and the world outside of himself, where the mayflies move. Yet this line is not completely dissolved, for the second stanza ends with the poet comparing them to “the pistons of some bright machine.” Machines and their parts must be created by someone else, and so by comparing the group of flies to a “bright machine,” the speaker implies that they were designed and made specifically for this very reason: to dance together as a single, glittering machine. The kinetic energy is also emphasized here, for pistons are moving parts.

While the focus has thus far been external—the speaker writes about the world outside of himself—in the final stanza, the poem shifts from the mayflies dancing in the field to the inner workings of the speaker himself:

Watching those lifelong dancers of a day

As night closed in, I felt myself alone

In a life too much my own,

More mortal in my separateness than they—

The tone moves from celebratory to solipsistic. The speaker realizes his distance from the flies; he is a member of the audience, not of the dance troupe. The singular possessive pronoun in the phrase “a life too much *my* own [emphasis added]” accentuates the distance between himself and the mayflies. The mayflies have their peers, but he seems to be alone, in that he is the only one of his species present. Also, the day is turning to night, which means that he will soon be further separated from the mayflies in that he will no longer be able to see them in the dark. By calling attention to himself, the speaker demonstrates that he is acutely aware of his role as poet. As in “An Event,” the witnessing of a beautiful scene of animals moving in unity causes the speaker joy at first, but then anxiety. Realization of his “separateness” follows from witnessing the innumerable beings dancing together.

There is a volta, however, halfway through this last stanza, which signifies a change in the speaker’s thoughts. This turn is indicated by a dash and by the word “unless” in the line following the dash:

Unless, I thought, I had been called to be

Not fly or star

But one whose task is joyfully to see

How fair the fiats of the caller are.

The tone shifts from solipsistic despondency to one of vocational calling. In the first part of the stanza, he realizes that he is not part of the group he is witnessing, but in this second part, he

recognizes that this is how things are meant to be. He is “called to be” a poet, not a mayfly or a star in the night sky. The call to versify may be an internal one, but the speaker gives it a theological meaning, as well. It is one of the “fiats of the caller,” and the language of this is intrinsically religious. The word “fiat” has come to be used in English to mean an authoritative command, but it comes from the Latin for “let it be done,” and this Latinate origin has Biblical tones since the word “fiat” is present in the creation story of Genesis, in Mary’s assent in Luke, and in the “Pater Noster” of Matthew. In this poem, then, “fiat” connotes both an authoritative command to write and a placement inside of a religious tradition. While the poet may be the *namer*, his impulse to do so comes from the *caller*, who is implied to be the Christian God. The speaker’s “task,” then, is not merely self-imposed, but is part of his spiritual calling.

The speaker does not explain the exact reasons or details of his calling—this is not a treatise on the Christian poet—but rather he remembers that his “task is joyfully to see / How fair the fiats of the caller are,” which brings him consolation. He no longer dwells on his inability to float and dance above the field with the rest of his insects, but instead focuses on the vocational aspects of his separateness. The movement of the mayflies, then, does not just delight the speaker aesthetically, but also frees him from the gravity of the world by releasing him from his feeling of loneliness by reminding him of his own religious duty and purpose, which is to praise the created world. His dissimilarity from the mayflies is thus both a blessing and a tragedy, in that he has found an existential purpose which he fulfills as poet, but he must remain a lonely observer rather than a participant in the “figured scene” before him.

This call both to praise the world and to notice the deeper metaphysical and religious aspects that underlie materiality continues in Wilbur’s most recent work, *Anterooms* (2010). Published after *Collected Poems, 1943-2004* was released, *Anterooms* composes its own slim

volume. Like *Collected Poems*, *Anterooms* contains a variety of new poems, translations, riddles, and children's rhymes. Due to its relatively recent appearance in criticism and the brevity of each of its poems, a discussion of the grace, language, and energy of *Anterooms* as a whole is more useful than an analysis of a single representative poem would be. Incidentally, several poems published in this collection were actually begun decades beforehand. Like Rome, many of Wilbur's poems were not built in a day, for as he admits in a 2010 interview with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, he sometimes spends years on his verse: "I'm a dreadful perfectionist and slow worker, and so, as I often say, my chief virtue as a poet and translator is that I'm willing to sit in a chair all day to get two lines that I can bear the sight of." In many ways, this contributes to the overall feeling of continuity in his work over the decades.

As David Lyle Jeffrey opines in his review of *Anterooms*, "There is a sense of consistency in his work that emerges not only from his craftsmanship as a poet but from his constancy as an affectionate observer of creation, both Nature and human nature" (n. pag.). Many of the poems in *Anterooms* celebrate people, animals, plants, and other objects of nature for their subject matter; furthermore, many of these subjects exhibit kinetic energy. In "A Measuring Worm," a caterpillar climbs the "steep window screen" (*Anterooms* 5). In "Flying," the speaker daydreams about flying above the treetops "[t]hrough gaps that the wind makes" (7). The trees of a "Young Orchard" are described moving "On a gusty day, // Nodding one and all / To one tougher, as they / Rise again and fall" (11). The orchard also "hum[s] with / Mediating bees." A family trip to the beach of "Galveston, 1961" describes swimming in "choppy shallows" and shaking a headful of "spattering hair" (19). As a poet, Wilbur still celebrates the movement of life, especially the kinetic activity of animals, trees, and people.



Though the energy of *Anterooms* is arguably different from previous work, many of the poems still reflect the “movement of the mind and heart toward understanding and clarification,” to use Wilbur’s phrase (Butts 42). This movement toward clarification includes Wilbur’s continual exploration of the word-world relationship. In “A Measuring Worm,” for example, Wilbur compares the arch of an inchworm’s back to “Dark omegas meant / to warn of Last Things,” thus connecting the caterpillar to a Greek letter symbolic of endings (*Anterooms* 5). The inchworm is a physical object that reminds Wilbur of a letter of the alphabet (in essence, it reminds him of language), and this Greek letter further connotes the philosophical notion of end times. Thing, word, and idea come together in a single image. A delight in playing with language is thus still essential to this collection of poetry.

As before, the levity of delight is paired with emotional gravity, for Jeffrey identifies the tone of *Anterooms* as “one of ‘reckoning,’ as [Wilbur] calls it, less a retrospect than an examination of conscience” (n. pag.). These poems often have one eye on life and the other eye on life’s end. In “A Measuring Worm,” the inchworm’s athletic majesty leads the poet to think about his own slow movement toward death: “And I too don’t know / Toward what undreamt condition / Inch by inch I go” (*Anterooms* 5). Just as the caterpillar is ignorant of what life is like after metamorphosis, so is the poet unaware of what he will experience after death. *Anterooms* indeed “reflects...the perspective of his own good old age, wise and full of years,” as Jeffrey states, in its dedication to capturing the physical world in words and to exploring philosophically the transcendent world that exists outside the senses. This motif of the movement of journey has always been present in Wilbur’s work as a reflection on how the poet and the reader better their understanding of reality and of the world, and this kinetic energy is not only part of the movement through life, but also from life to the unknown afterlife.

## 5. Conclusion

Displays of movement often startle us and make us notice the world anew. In 1917, Viktor Shklovsky posited that the purpose of art, of poetry, of literature is to make the familiar unfamiliar. As people go through life, their actions, the objects that surround them, the people they encounter become too automatic, too familiar, too habitual. “And so life is reckoned as nothing,” Shklovsky argues. “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (12). It is art which restores vision and meaning to an automatized life. Art “exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.” In many ways, Wilbur’s art is fundamentally (though not exclusively) about recovering that appreciation for life and for the things of the world. “I’m prompted by the things around me and by my understanding of them to write this or that poem,” Wilbur muses (Houghton Mifflin). He manages to celebrate the world as it is, recognizing both its gravity and levity, its limitedness and its limitlessness.

Wilbur also revels in the limitations and the potentialities of language, making “the fullest possible use of the connotations of both sounds and imagery,” to borrow a phrase from Deutsch (38). His pun-filled language highlights the inherent ambiguities within language, encourages readers to consider multiple meanings of a single word or phrase, and celebrates the connections between otherwise-unlike things. “[I]f puns seem, at times, to confuse,” remarks Pollack, “they actually enlighten us through both laughter and insight. They keep us from taking ourselves too seriously, and sharpen our capacity for creative thinking. Ultimately, puns keep our minds alert, engaged, and nimble in this quickening world, revealing new connections and fresh interpretations” (152). Wilbur’s pun-filled poetry does just that: it guards against solipsism and it encourages alertness, creativity, and engagement in both the poet and the reader.

Wilbur's careful attention to both word and world are also his means of understanding the philosophical and religious aspects of the world. In "Juggler," "Grace," and in many of the poems in *Anterooms*, Wilbur praises physical dexterity that combats complacency, which is often a philosophical blindness to the things of this world. "Grace" also begins to study the presence of the divine in the world, exploring the idea of God entering the world through a theological understanding of grace and through other incarnational aspects of Christianity. "Mayflies" continues this religious theme, focusing on the poet's spiritual calling to praise the created world, his vocation of celebration. "Mayflies" shares its metapoetic focus with "An Event," as both explore the role of the poet and the relationship of the human mind to the external world.

Throughout his work, Wilbur maintains an aesthetic fascination with kinetic energy, especially insofar as this graceful movement often seems to defy the world's gravity. Yet Wilbur never wants to ignore gravity, for he celebrates the ability to actually deal with weight (both emotional and physical) rather than attempt to ignore its presence in life. There is a type of joy that exists in isolation from the grittiness of reality, a humor that distracts from seriousness; on the other hand, there also exists a joy that acknowledges the weight of the world, but creates art that mixes the lighthearted and the serious. Wilbur's poetry is the latter. This tempering of seriousness with levity lends an accessibility to Wilbur's work, allowing readers to delve into the material, philosophical, and spiritual meditations of his poems while simultaneously instilling in them an appreciation for the vivid language with which he celebrates the world.

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