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Writers Forum

3-13-1969

Richard Wilbur: 03-13-1969

Richard P. Wilbur

Gregory Fitz Gerald

William Heyen

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FITZGERALD: “And you said in an essay on your own work and how it memeroffs anthology once that you felt that there was an increased responsiveness to what poetry in America, I think this essay must be at least five or six years old. I wonder if you still feel that or whether you'd like to change that view or qualify it.”

WILBUR: “I don't know whether I've noticed any increase in the last five years since that essay was written, but if I compare the present situation with that of let's say the late forties, I think it's obviously true that for the hearing of poetry we have a much larger audience in America now. And of course the audience is chiefly supplied by the universities which have more and more courses in the literature of the last three minutes.”

FITZGERALD: “[laughter] yes, true, I teach one of them. But I was wondering, do you think that this oral presentation of poetry has really affected the poem in any way itself and the structure or the aesthetics of the poem?”

WILBUR: “Oh I think so, I think it has, I think it's had a considerable effect. I know that my own early poems are on the page poems, they're written with a tin ear. Some of them are very hard to speak aloud. There will be particular lines which are hard to deliver, a tenor couldn't handle them. And but because I've more and more been reading to audiences, as almost every poet can say nowadays, and because I was for a while involved in the writing of Broadway lyrics, I've developed an automatic sense of what is pronounceable and an increased feeling for a variation of sound, for vowel sequences that kind of thing. I don't go about it analytically, programmatically, but I know that the results are more speakable and more sonorous than they used to be. There're other effects too, it's not only a matter of appealing to the ear, because the poem is now more conceived of as something to be heard, performance gets into it now. I bet that most poets who do a good bit of performing, of reading, find themselves insensibly becoming more dramatic, getting a real speaking voice into their poems more than they used to do.”

FITZGERALD: “Do you think it has any effect on also the complexity of it, in other words, is poetry that is going to be presented orally tending to become more easy to grasp by the audience?”

WILBUR: “I should guess so, I think the at least in its emotional spine of a poem which is written, I'd rather not say with an audience in mind, but a poem which has been written by a poet who's been reading aloud is going to be simple, there's going to be simple tonal progressions or simple progressions of attitude, of tone of voice. Or perhaps the whole thing will tend to be simpler. I know, at any rate, that my poems have become more dramatic, more like the speaking voice, and perhaps somewhat in response to my experience as a reader aloud of poetry. Some people very conspicuously have had responded to the increased audience. I remember back in 1956 when I went out to San Francisco, Allen Ginsberg had just read his poem “Howl” for the first time, and it was played to me off of a tape and it was what that first performance of “Howl” was very much like the work of a high-toned stand-up comedian. Ginsberg really worked with an audience the way a comedian does, though in a higher sense perhaps. A lot of poetry is of that character is being written, the sort of poetry that would amuse an audience delivered in the manner of a comedian, perhaps with jazz backing.”

FITZGERALD: “Yes, as Ferlinghetti does on several occasions.”

HEYEN: "What do you think of how, I just have to ask you that questions after you mentioned it, because in certain senses, Richard Wilbur and Allen Ginsberg represent the antithetical poles in contemporary American poetry."

WILBUR: "Yeah, he's supposed to say no to me and I'm supposed to say no to him but actually I think he's a person of a great deal of talent and I think he throws it around loosely as I from my position with my habits I have to feel that if I had his material I'd handle it a little differently, I wouldn't be quite so exhibitionistic or so loosely Whitmanian. But I think he's-- I'm glad he's on the scene."

HEYEN: "Mister Wilbur, one critic says and I want to quote that "public issues have not been particularly fruitful sources of subject matter for Mister Wilbur." Would you agree with this and if so, why is this so?"

WILBUR: "I can think of exceptions."

HEYEN: "Sure."

WILBUR: "That is I wrote a poem called "Speech for the Repeal of the McCarran Act" and then I have a poem called "Advice to a Prophet" which is concerned to offer the reader a means of being afraid of nuclear warfare. And what else, I have a poem against Lyndon Johnson that may exhaust, however, my public or political poems."

HEYEN: "You know, many poets today are writing war poems; Georgie Starbuck and Robert Bly, and I do sense in your new book the background of the times, but not poems directly topical."

WILBUR: "That's right, I think it, in a poem like on the marginal way in this new book, the Vietnam War and World War 2 and much else is in the background but the poem isn't strictly, specifically, isn't politically engage, really, it's using politics as a background as part of one's inevitable awareness in a time like this. I don't know, it seems to me that most of the protest poetry being written now is pretty awful, that it has a posterish simplicity which keeps it from honoring the subject. My idea of a good political poet is Yeats' "Easter 1916.""

FITZGERALD: "Yes, I agree to that."

WILBUR: "Which does transform in a very moving way, MacDonagh and MacBride and Connolly and Pearse before it's through. But it's full of qualifications. It says the English may keep faith after all is said and done. It could seem if it were, if it had less force and sweep at the end, it could seem like a quibbling poem to someone passionately and simply committed to the Irish rebellion. But for me, Yeats' "Easter 1916" is what poetry ought to do with public matters. It shouldn't, I think, surrender any complexity."

HEYEN: "He was interested in the lonely impulse of the life, as he puts it in one poem, and there is his poem on being asked to write a war poem, I think it's called. Would you read a poem for us that is not a war poem? I'd like-- let me grab hold of this. I'd like you to read "The Death of a Toad" and then I'd like to ask you about it."

WILBUR: "Alright."

HEYEN: "This is one of your classic pieces."

WILBUR: "This goes back a way, this must have been written, oh I don't know, in 1949, something like that.

The Death of a Toad

A toad the power mower caught,
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop has got
To the garden verge, and sanctuaried him
Under the cineraria leaves, in the shade
Of the ashen and heartshaped leaves, in a dim,
Low, and a final glade.

The rare original heartsblood goes,
Spends in the earthen hide, in the folds and wizenings, flows
In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes. He lies
As still as if he would return to stone,
And soundlessly attending, dies
Toward some deep monotone,

Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.
Day dwindles, drowning and at length is gone
In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear
To watch, across the castrate lawn,
The haggard daylight steer."