8

Prix de Rome

"The morning air is all awash with angels"

I am amused by Dick and myself as we approach the city by two entirely different roads. He reads Augustus Hare's Walks in Rome, *decides in the morning that he is going to the Campidoglio and then goes there with book in hand and comes back with every date at hand. I get on a bus and deliberately get lost and haven't read anything yet. But we seem to fill in for one another.*

—Charlee Wilbur, letter to John Malcolm Brinnin, fall 1954

When the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded Wilbur a Prix de Rome for the academic year 1954–55, he was filled with anticipation. The city overflowed with art that drew upon Christian and pagan traditions, in forms ranging from early paintings, frescoes, and statuary to baroque architecture and music. All of these elements, plus Rome's *dolce vita* moment—its street life, thriving cinema, and postwar building boom—would find a place in the poems he wrote that year.

For Charlee, crossing the Atlantic on the *Cristoforo Columbo* was just the beginning of a trip "never to be duplicated": shining calm days by the pool, gala champagne dinners served on confetti-covered table linens, dancing to music from a five-piece hootchy-kootchy band. "I have no notion of time," she wrote, in lieu of a date, at the top of a letter to John Brinnin describing her first weeks in Rome.[1] The Wilburs traveled tourist class; but because there were only three first-class children on board, Ellen, Christopher, and Nathan Wilbur (now eleven, six, and three years old) could spend their mornings and late afternoons with the ship's governess and their evenings

after supper watching puppet shows and movies. At noon they joined their mother at the pool. Charlee sunned and swam three times a day, boasting to Brinnin that she'd acquired "the most becoming tan of my life . . . displayed fetchingly each night on the polished [dance] floor." The Wilburs found good company among the mix of tourist-class passengers. Among the Italians returning home, they met Dino Rotundi, a young Roman water engineer. Once in Rome, he became their friend and devoted *cicerone,* showing them historic views, out-of-the-way fountains, and neighborhood cafés.[2]

One day, at the end of a four-hour tour of architectural marvels, the trio stopped at the Sagrestia, a trattoria across the cobblestone square from the Pantheon, where Dino introduced them to another of Rome's wonders—a clairvoyant (*veggente,* in Italian) so formidable that he read Charlee's mind "like a book" and "narrowed in on Dick so accurately that he still hasn't returned to normal."[3] The clairvoyant told him, "The job you need to undertake in Rome is not well defined, since it will be useful tomorrow, not today. In any case, you are in Rome for your erudition and you will complete your mission well."[4] For twenty years the memory of this charming, chain-smoking, inwardly tormented veggente would haunt Wilbur, until he finished and published "The Mind-Reader," one of his finest and most ambitious poems.

"Pressing to devour the city in great heady gulps"

The academy did not offer living quarters for the fellows' families, so the Wilburs rented a furnished fourth-floor apartment at 17 Via Sprovieri in Monteverde, a pleasant hilltop neighborhood with a large outdoor market. The academy was only a few minutes away, and the most direct route cut between an enormous cage filled with exotic birds and an ivy-covered wall fountain in the park called Villa Sciarra.

For the first week or so the Wilburs ate dinner in the academy's high-ceilinged dining room or outdoors in the courtyard. Between cocktail hour and after-dinner billiards time, both spaces buzzed with conversation. Charlee grouped the "mélange" of residents into categories of her own devising: very young scholars, "bearded and predictable"; artists, especially sculptors, whose conversations she found stimulating; prima donnas wary of being upstaged; and cat haters, a reference to the fellows who were not charmed by the ubiquitous *gatti de Roma* that haunted the city.[5]

Liz Young, the wife of the British journalist and writer Wayland Young, who was covering Rome for the *Observer,* first met the Wilburs at a November 6 dinner party hosted by academy residents Robert and Claire White. She had the impression that Wilbur was "a neat gangling, college, tidy young man who is to be a resident poet at a women's college somewhere" and was taken aback by what she assumed was his naïveté: "He believed two things I told him and that shocked me rather, because people ought to look at what you say carefully, they ought to accept it as examinable, neither as gospel nor anathema. He sang nice American songs very charmingly."[6] A snapshot from her photo album shows him in a jaunty beret, still looking as young as an Amherst student and standing shoulder to shoulder with Charlee, who has a Burberry plaid scarf wrapped around her neck. The Youngs and the Wilburs became friends, and Wilbur credits their outings to churches around the city for helping him distinguish baroque style from the gilt-edged mirrors and moldings of the rococo period.[7]

The architectural historian William H. Macdonald (Bill), who received a 1954–1956 academy fellowship, had met the Wilburs in October, when he and his wife, Dale, moved into their quarters in the main villa. Writing to a friend about the academy's ambience, Bill included Dick and Charlee in a group he described as congenial and pleasant: "This atmosphere of intelligent people will spoil me completely should we end up sometime in an average neighborhood—that sounds very snobbish but these people have, most of them, a genuine curiosity in knowing what the world's about, and a number of them have a few of the answers."[8] Others in that group included the poet Anthony Hecht, who was spending a post-fellowship year in Rome with his wife, Pat; Adja Yunkers, an abstract painter who was spending a Guggenheim year in the city with his wife, the art critic Dore Ashton; Robert White, a sculptor (and the grandson of Stanford White, whose architectural firm had designed the academy), and his wife, Claire; Jack Zajac, a Hungarian-born sculptor from California, whose work greatly impressed Charlee; and Charles Singleton, a Dante scholar from Harvard, and his wife, Eula.

Nonetheless, by November Charlee noticed that the group's initial excited intimacy had worn thin, a reaction that was rather similar, she thought, to what generally happened among the writers at Bread Loaf after the first week. Everyone seemed embarrassed by knowing too much about everyone else. Charlee especially sympathized with Hecht, because his marital problems were attracting gossip and unsolicited advice.[9] She and Dick

decided to dine at home for most of the week, where they could spend time with the children before bedtime. A woman named Franca was serving as the family's housekeeper and nanny, and she cooked them simple but sumptuous local fare, sometimes alongside Charlee. Franca made a ritual of serving the family at an ornately carved wooden table in the dining room, bringing grapes and cheese, as well as coffee and grappa, at the end of each evening meal.[10]

Wilbur spent alternate eight-hour days working in a little brick studio set at the edge of the academy property against part of the Aurelian Wall, a third-century fortification that had defined the city limits until the nineteenth century. His studio had begun life as a potter's shed; its forsaken wheel and kiln still stood outside the door. On its garden side, windows looked down onto rows of artichokes, cabbages, fig trees, onions, and every conceivable variety of lettuce. Burlap covered its back wall, to which Wilbur pinned verbal "artifacts" inscribed in his best italic hand—for instance, the words *reticulum* (from the Latin) and *areté* (from the Greek), which would appear in "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra," the great fountain poem he was about to draft. Every day a noontime cannon boomed from Piazza Garibaldi, a few hundred yards away, announcing lunch and a siesta to follow; and he could hear the nuns singing in a nearby convent.

On non-writing days Wilbur took walking excursions around the city. During his first months in residence his guide was Augustus Hare's *Walks in Rome,* a late-nineteenth-century book that focused on the city's ancient *centro.* Charlee, however, took off by herself, seeking not destinations but experience—getting deliberately lost, chatting with the locals at espresso bars and cafés, and recovering the Italian she had learned as a child on Capri.[11]

One night, when Wilbur was suffering from a sinus infection, Charlee and Dino walked for ten miles through the city, drinking from fifteen fountains along the way. With the twin bell towers of Trinità dei Monti at their backs, they headed down the long, wide marble stairway (known as the Spanish Steps) and into the Piazza di Spagna, where water spills from a fountain shaped like a sinking ship. They wound along narrow byways toward the Tiber and sat on Tiber Island dangling their feet in the water. At three in the morning they found an open bar and dined on mussels. Afterward they rode till dawn in a *carrozza.*[12]

The details of his wife's Fellini-esque romp though the city prompted Wilbur to write "Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning," his first Roman poem.

In the final two stanzas a cinematic focus tracks Charlee as she pirouettes down the Spanish Steps, poised at a pivotal moment in her life and caught unawares:

> Nothing upon her face
> But some impersonal loneliness,—not then a girl,
> But as it were a reverie of the place,
> A called-for falling glide and whirl;
>
> As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
> Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,
> Rides on over the lip—
> Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

In a November letter to Brinnin, Charlee alluded to the mood that the poem captured: "It is a distinct relief to begin the business of living here rather than pressing to devour the city in great heady gulps. I feel . . . satiated, languorous, and ever so slightly drowsy. I want now to be taken unawares by things, to move softly and slowly for a while, and to be surprised by tastes."[13]

Still in this frame of mind, she described an autumn trip to Frascati as a feast for the senses. She, Wilbur, and a few academy acquaintances arrived mid-afternoon on a "blazing blue and gold day with that sky, that sky which brings the unbelieving eyes to actual pain." Wine barrels were everywhere, and on almost every corner stood a "weather-beaten cart breaking with ripe grapes" for the first press. "Within five minutes of entering the town, I was dizzy drunk from the fumes," she told Brinnin. The group chose a cantina with cavernous rooms below street level and ordered a liter of Frascati drawn straight "from the mother barrel into a cool flask." Someone mentioned that drinking one tumbler of it was the same as downing two good-sized martinis. "Naturally," Charlee wrote, "I laughed and drained it off. With the residue of wine in my nostrils, I was easily levitated after the first glass." From their table they could see the workers outside on the street. Wearing breechcloths, they were totally soaked and stained in wine, and Charlee was struck by their smiles and their jovial spirits. As she said to Brinnin, the scene seemed to bring to life *The Kermess,* a painting by Brueghel the Elder that portrays peasants dancing merrily at a village feast.[14]

The academy party went down three flights of stairs into the cantina's lowest cavern, where many years' worth of barreled and bottled wine sat under the hanging stalactites. Someone in the party purchased a bottle of

old champagne made from the proprietor's prized grapes. As they prepared to leave, Charlee recalled, "The *padrone* all but cried at the notion of the wine traveling back to Rome in the car. The motion would ruin it, he said, so there was nothing left but to drink it on the spot. My God, what an elixir from Heaven. Home very late, and Dick and I, needless to say, spent the rest of the night with Frascati, Frascati, Frascati."[15]

The Wilburs went on a number of day trips organized by resident archaeologists and historians. Bill Macdonald introduced them to the ancient Italian countryside and to the now land-locked harbor at Ostia Antica, with its small, perfectly preserved theater and its ancient wine bars on every corner. He showed them the Etruscan tombs near Tarquinia, whose colorful wall paintings celebrating the inhabitants' carousing and copulating had once charmed D. H. Lawrence. Macdonald also brought the Wilburs to the necropolis at Cerveteri, a hive of mounded, igloo-like tombs; to the many-fountained garden of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli; and to Hadrian's vast countryside villa. Everywhere Macdonald gave impromptu lectures to explain the original purpose of a ruin or to verbally reconstruct a library or a temple from a bit of rubble and a few column drums.

Wilbur had certainly read earlier poets' meditations on Rome's grandeur. He knew that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's experience in Rome had liberated him from his bureaucratic duties in Weimar, and that living in Rome had freed Percy Bysshe Shelley from persecution for his atheism and adultery. In Wilbur's case the city sparked a need to write poems that probed deeply into the religious beliefs he possessed but had yet to express. What Hecht characterized as Wilbur's "philosophical bent" and "religious temper, which are by no means the same thing," began to "consort comfortably together" in Rome.[16]

One morning, after waking to the screech of a clothesline pulley and the sight of billowing white laundry, Wilbur was inspired to write "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," which itself inspired the title of his third book, *Things of This World* (1956).[17] The first stanza of the poem ends with these lines: "Outside the open window / The morning air is all awash with angels." This angel motif also figures in "A Plain Song for Comadre" (written in Corrales and also published in *Things of This World*), a poem in which Wilbur imagined stained suds flashing like angel feathers on sunlit church steps as he described how a woman's steadfast service to her church attests to her faith. In "Love Calls Us," however, he looked more intensely

at how ordinary people, as they go about their mundane rounds of work and pleasure, seek and find evidence of a divinity in their lives.

Wilbur chose his Roman subjects with care. Two spectacular fountains; shirts flapping in the wind; the inner dome of a great cathedral; a clairvoyant mind; a railway station's jagged roofline: all became arenas in which divine and human awareness engaged. His most ambitious Roman poems aim not for Frost's "momentary stay[s] against confusion" but for clarities that remain when the book is closed. In contrast to his pre-Rome work, Christian belief is central in five of the six poems he wrote or conceived in 1954, providing structure, imagery, and passion.[18]

The Veggente

Many academy fellows and visitors consulted the clairvoyant who had astonished the Wilburs on their first night in Vecchia Roma. One was Charles Singleton, who accompanied Wilbur to the Sagrestia several times. (Wilbur dedicated his poem "The Mind-Reader" to Singleton and his wife.) Another was the American classicist and Amherst professor John Moore, also a fellow in the mid-1950s, who included a verbal portrait of the clairvoyant in a letter to his sister Betty, dated January 22, 1956:

> The Sagrestia. A well-known pizza joint, not notable for its food but for its mind-reader and fortuneteller. He's a slender, sweet-natured, dignified old gentleman: he's also part of the music and plays the violin. You write your question on a piece of paper, in Italian, and fold it up, all the while thinking very hard about the question you want to have answered. He takes the paper for a moment in his hands and gives it back again (he claims it's important for him to touch the paper—I'm sure it is!) and then he goes into a trance, from which presently emerging he writes down the answer to the question on a piece of paper. He then asks (I forget on what pretext) to hold the question again, after which he restores to the client both question and answer. The question I asked was: "Where is my brother Dan?" The answer: "I can't see where your brother Dan is right now; but do not be anxious, you will hear from him within the year"! I was taken to that place by Berthe Marti, one of the people at the Academy (there are several in all) who patronize this fortuneteller, some just for the game, others half or more than half convinced. According to their accounts he sometimes doesn't ask to hold the question but only to touch it in the clenched hand of the client. But it seemed perfectly plain that the

> routine he used with me gave him opportunities for sleight of hand which any good magician should have found sufficient. But the odd part of it was that I didn't want to believe that I was being imposed upon, because I liked him so much.[19]

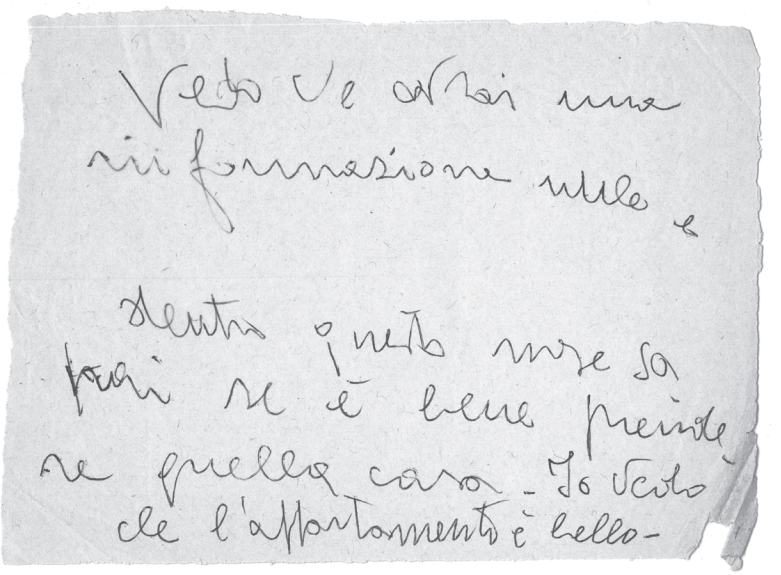
In "The Mind-Reader" Wilbur speaks in the voice of a clairvoyant possessed of an uncanny gift that turns out to be an intolerable burden. The poem, which was not published until 1976, shares certain qualities with Robert Browning's dramatic monologues and Frost's *North of Boston* poems, especially "Home Burial" and "Death of the Hired Man." Like them, "The Mind-Reader" projects waves of implication from a highly charged but realistic encounter between two people.

In a 1995 interview with Paul Mariani, Wilbur divulged an important detail reported to him by "a friend," probably Singleton, who heard the clairvoyant say, "It's no fun to be a mind reader, you know. It's no fun to have a mind like a common latrine." Wilbur told Mariani:

> The invadedness of the mind-reader's mind was what appalled me and made it necessary to write the poem. Thinking about what it must be like to have a mind so vulnerable led me to seek, in vain of course, to imagine what the mind of God must be like, continually besieged by all of us, by all that we have to say, all that we have to confess. That's at the center of the poem, really: a kind of amazement at the thought of what a mind must be like that can put up with all of us and still be inviolate.[20]

The paranormal aspect may have first attracted Wilbur to this savant of the pizzeria, but the religious implications led him to shape the clairvoyant's life story into a metaphysical parable.[21]

As the poem begins, the mind reader is sitting in his neighborhood trattoria and telling a professor how his vocation found him. The routine recounted in the poem is virtually identical to John Moore's description of the real clairvoyant. Speaking in oblique, well-chosen metaphors, the mind reader muses on the mysteries of objects "truly lost"—a hat dropped from a rampart into a forest, a pipe wrench "catapulted" from the back of a truck, a book blown out to sea. He traces the origin of his calling to a childhood gift for discovering the whereabouts of lost things and goes on to explain how he "got from that to this." But he notes that his ability to penetrate another's thoughts is not infallible; about 10 percent of the time he must cheat in order to access an answer to an invisible or puzzling question. His gift, he tells us, impairs his emotional health: invasion of another's privacy



In a second note the mind reader commented on the pleasant condition of Wilbur's apartment in Rome. *Courtesy of Richard Wilbur.*

is a cheerless experience, a limited version of divine omniscience, and thus a source of immense distress. It removes all barriers between him and the pain felt and uttered by the people he entertains and serves.

So summarized, the narrator's predicament seems unenviable, though hardly godlike. But Wilbur's own sleight of hand gradually transformed the mind reader's clairvoyance into a divinity's ability to access the conscience of every mortal. Wilbur seeded his character's ruminations with thoughts, images, and unspoken abysses that demand we take the portrait of this rueful clairvoyant as more than a sympathetic look at a man who unhappily knows too much. The poem invites its readers to pursue more deeply what it might involve to become an all-knowing divinity.

Wilbur took pains to define exactly what his character—and, by extension, his God—can and cannot do. Does God truly possesses total access to our minds, of the kind asserted in 1 Samuel and Matthew, highlighted in the Anglican communion service (in which Wilbur participated for years as a lay reader), and alluded to in the last act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? If the answer is yes, then why doesn't he intervene more often to keep us out of sin's way? Wilbur explained that God prefers to forgive and heal the sinner rather than prevent the sin. His forbearance demands a moral discipline

that both he and the mind reader find lacking among their respective flocks. But unlike God, the mind reader has no healing or forgiving power; and his clients, he says, are content only to be heard. This comforting aspect provides a potent metaphoric vehicle for Wilbur's mighty tenor.[22] Like the mind reader's clients, believers in an all-knowing God are more reassured than terrified to imagine that their hearts are open to divine inspection.

As Wilbur detailed his clairvoyant's abilities, miseries, and limitations, he himself received a glimpse of what it might feel like to enter the mind of God. Was God troubled, as the mind reader is, by the human squalor and sinfulness he couldn't escape? Did his excruciating attention sometimes flag?

So it seems. At one point the mind reader wonders if he might miss something that would reveal a hidden goodness in his trespassing "communicants." Does God himself worry that he might miss something redeeming? Do the guilty and defenseless worry that he'll miss something exculpatory? In the climactic riff of the poem Wilbur, through his Anglicized seer, imagined how God experiences us:

> Faith, justice, valor
> All those reputed rarities of soul
> Confirmed in marble by our public statues—
> You may be sure they are rare indeed
> Where the soul mopes in private, and I listen.
> Sometimes I wonder if the blame is mine,
> If through a sullen fault of the mind's ear
> I miss a resonance in all their fretting.
> Is there some huge *attention,* do you think,
> Which *suffers* us and is inviolate,
> To which all hearts are open, which remarks
> The sparrow's weighty fall, and overhears
> In the worst rancor a deflected sweetness?
> I should be glad to know it.[23]

Wilbur seemed to imply that the infinite attention of God's mind as an alternative grace differs from the redeeming sacrifice of Christ: "Is there some huge *attention,* do you think, / Which *suffers* us and is inviolate?" Here the word *suffers* recalls the Greek verb *pathein* ("to suffer"), the New Testament term for the passion of Christ. God "passions" humankind through the enormity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. A creator who imagines and endures universally sinning minds is a far less extreme but perhaps more comprehensible deity. This father now joins his son, according to the parable that "The Mind-Reader" works out, so that both "suffer" the

entirety of human sin through total access to human consciousness. But however godlike the mind reader feels—whatever peace he lacks because he cannot escape the constant assault of human suffering he hears—he, unlike God, can escape into oblivion, especially in the form of *vino rosso* or *bianco,* which he cadges from his customers.

In this punctilious, musical, drunken, part-charlatan, Wilbur found an analogy for the openness of all minds to God and joined the existential unhappiness of God to humankind's own. In sympathizing with the gentle veggente, he invited the reader to sympathize with God. To some, this trope may seem presumptuous, even blasphemous, but its insight is immense and unique in America's mostly secular poetry.

Human-Divine Collaboration

Like "The Mind-Reader," Wilbur's other Roman poems suggest that a believer's relation to God is an inescapably collaborative enterprise: Christ's hand didn't write the gospels; his believers' hands did. Wilbur's rendering of human-divine collaboration raises the stakes of every one of these poems but especially "For the New Railway Station in Rome" and "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra." "For the New Railway Station" makes effective use of fugue form as the God invoked in its first stanza returns to preside over humankind's heavenly destination in its last. The eight-stanza poem begins by arguing that pilgrims to the holy city shouldn't gloat at the triumph of Christianity over its pagan predecessors, whose imperial might lies in ruins. It denies that "God is praised / By hurt pillars" or that the leveling of man's ambitious structures is God's way of reminding us of his preeminence and our limitations and insignificance. The poem finds proof that something divine exists in purely secular architectural grandeur, using as its example the Stazione di Termini, Rome's post–World War II railway station, which replaced the one Allied bombers destroyed. It celebrates the station's startling jaggedness and the rightness of its placement next to the ruin of an ancient wall, and the poem's inclusive, outreaching lines visually convey the physical form and structure of such inspired human creativity. The poem's final five stanzas follow:

> See, from the travertine
> Face of the office block, the roof of the booking-hall
> Sails out into the air beside the ruined
> Servian Wall,

Echoing in its light
And cantilevered swoop of reinforced concrete
The broken profile of these stones, defeating
That defeat

And straying the strummed mind,
By such a sudden chord as raised the town of Troy,
To where the least shard of the world sings out
In stubborn joy,

"What city is eternal
But that which prints itself within the groping head
Out of the blue unbroken reveries
Of the building dead?

"What is our praise or pride
But to imagine excellence, and try to make it?
What does it say over the door of Heaven
But *homo fecit*?"

Wilbur has been criticized for exalting such a "pedestrian" venue as a "booking hall" and for using what seems, to at least one classicist, to be excessively clever wordplay. In the seventh stanza, for instance, the verb "prints" and the adjective "blue" in two successive lines evoke *blueprints,* the architect's plan for incorporating an ancient Roman wall into his modern creation. Then, in the eighth stanza, the English-Latin pun embedded in the rhyme sounds of "make it" and "fake it" invokes the literal meaning of *homo fecit,* or "manmade."[24] To some that pun is unfortunate because it burdens an otherwise dignified classical Latin phrase with a homophonic, atheistic undercutting that suggests, in a superficial reading, that we deny our mortality by imagining an afterlife. Yet according to Wilbur, the pun was an unintended and unfortunate lexical irony.[25]

The link between human creative power and an imagined heaven is supported by two facts of historical and metaphysical life. First, humans have made heaven as they understand it, just as they have written gospels that assert a world-transforming religious dispensation. Second, because humankind is not divine, its imagined heaven, in all its splendor, is made of hopeful guesswork. Nonbelievers may respond, *pace* Wilbur, that our efforts are chimerical, even fake, but surely they are never intentionally so.

As the poem leads readers toward its final two stanzas, the narrator invokes the "building dead"—artists (such as the architect Bramante, who

first imagined the vast dome of Saint Peter's as a way to create an earthly echo of the vaster one above it) and religious visionaries (such as Dante, who mapped the afterlife in burning, penitential, and glorious detail using the Aristotelian and Aquinian master plans). For these artists "pride" in their work fuses with their "praise" of God. The stanzas form Wilbur's most explicit and memorable aria in celebration of human and godly collaboration. Here, human beings have not only imagined an excellent heaven and prescribed the conduct for attaining it but have also created and populated that heaven by means of the sincerity of their belief and by living honorable and generous earthly lives, even as they are beset by temptations to which they sometimes yield.

"No one knows, at sight a masterpiece"

Since 1950, Howard Moss had been the poetry editor of the *New Yorker,* and he and his colleagues were receptive to Wilbur's work, accepting a few poems every year. Though Moss was personally impressed by almost every Roman poem Wilbur sent to him in the autumn of 1954, he failed to persuade the magazine's poetry committee to accept any of them. In addition to Moss, the committee included Harold Ross, the magazine's founder and editor-in-chief; Katherine White, who maintained stylistic and grammatical control over the contents; the novelist William Maxwell; and Rachel Mackenzie, an assistant poetry editor. Moss may have been the chief poetry editor, but acceptance was by consensus or democratic vote. He could be, and often was, overruled by Ross, who strictly enforced an *obiter dictum:* nothing would be in the magazine that he didn't understand.[26]

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s many first-rate poets were at work in the English-speaking world, and the *New Yorker* committee had its pick of distinguished and enjoyable poems even as it exhibited a wariness toward extravagance, emotional or otherwise. During this fecund era, many accomplished poets primarily wrote formal verse, and a certain version of this style came to be known as a "*New Yorker* poem." The term was used mostly by those who had yet to write one, but even poets who published regularly in the magazine invoked it to separate their more adventurous poems from those crafted specifically for publication in the prestigious and well-paying magazine. A "*New Yorker* poem" generally fulfilled the following minimum requirements: it struck a fresh or pleasantly nostalgic note, displayed evident skill, contained no nonfactual statements, and neither unsettled nor

embarrassed the magazine's audience. It had to peacefully coexist alongside ads for luxury items from Chanel, Cadillac, and Tiffany.[27] Nonetheless, despite the limitations inherent in these parameters, the magazine, during Moss's tenure as editor (1950–1987), published a significant number of the era's best American poems.

It seems likely that Wilbur's Roman style clashed not only with the magazine's sophisticated self-image but also with its sense that religious belief should be a private and unspoken concern. The *New Yorker*'s rejection of these poems brings to mind the famous line from Ezra Pound's poem "Mr. Nixon" (1920): "And no one knows, at sight a masterpiece."[28] In the autumn of 1954 Wilbur began to send Moss what Charlee referred to as his "glistening" new poems, work that revealed "his best singing quality."[29] But for months "Piazza di Spagna" and "For the New Railway Station in Rome" languished in foggy and chilly Manhattan, and Wilbur heard nothing from Moss. On November 27, the poet forwarded "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," accompanying the submission with a brief, self-effacing note. He implied that the quantity of poems he'd turned out had prevented him from taking time to assess their quality. He hoped Moss's silence meant that at least one poem had found an advocate in the editorial office.[30]

In a November 30 letter that crossed Wilbur's in the mail, Moss rejected all the poems Wilbur had sent him from Rome but accepted "All These Birds," which he had submitted to the magazine before sailing to Italy. In some respects the editors' objections, as Moss summarized them, anticipated later critical reservations about Wilbur's poetry. "Piazza di Spagna" seemed too sentimental, Moss told him. Thanks to its enormously skillful execution, "For the New Railway Station" had almost made the cut, but Moss said that it had too many adjectives, and he disliked its exalted tone.[31] In a December 10 letter he rejected "Love Calls Us." He expressed his personal regret, telling Wilbur that the committee had liked it but thought it was "a little too special" for their magazine.[32]

Wilbur and Charlee both knew that he was writing well and in a new vein, so these rejections did not depress or discourage him. In any case, *Botteghe Oscure,* an acclaimed multilingual literary review based in Rome, soon accepted "Love Calls Us."[33] The journal had been founded in 1948 by Principessa Marguerite Caetani, a Connecticut-born heiress, who had established her literary credentials in the 1920s as the editor of the French-language journal *Commerce. Botteghe Oscure* had previously published Wilbur's "Looking into History."[34] Now the principessa drew the Wilburs

into her literary circle, inviting them to lunches at her home (which also housed the journal's editorial office) in a Roman neighborhood that had been fashionable since the Renaissance.

In January the Wilburs went on a day trip to Ninfa, where Caetani hosted a gathering at her summer palazzo. The party topped off a two-week whirlwind of academy-related events. The composer Paul Hindemith had conducted an ensemble at the church of Santa Cecilia, the Belgian embassy had hosted a concert of Franz Joseph Haydn's music, and the pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale had performed at the Villa Aurelia. There had been a "smoky, babbling" cocktail party for the novelist Katherine Anne Porter at the Irish embassy and a stuffy reception at the French embassy; and the academy's director, Laurance Roberts, and his wife, Isabel, had hosted two "state dinners" (as Charlee called them) at the Villa Aurelia.[35]

Wilbur made one last attempt in the spring of 1955 to send the *New Yorker* a poem that revealed his new visionary scope. "Altitudes" describes two domes: a majestic one in a Roman cathedral, whose gleaming white wainscoting is edged with gold rosettes; and a lantern-shaped cupola on the Amherst, Massachusetts, home of Emily Dickinson. In that year critics were responding to a newly released volume of Dickinson's complete works. Allen Tate, for instance, had noted how her imagination engaged religious ideas and abstractions, a focus that Wilbur certainly shared as he explored his own spiritual awakening in Rome. In "Altitudes" he portrayed the two domes, one sumptuous and one spare, as equally suitable places for religious contemplation. The poem reveals a deepening affinity not only for Dickinson as a poet—one who insists "on discovering the facts of her inner experience" and "describing and distinguishing the states and motions of her soul"—but also for her next-door neighbor who is "lost in thought." The neighbor is, as Wilbur explained years later, "a kind of generic New Englander making up his religion for himself."[36]

But when "Altitudes" reached the *New Yorker,* it, too, was rejected. Not until August 1955 did a poem conceived in Rome (but finished in Wellesley, Massachusetts) break through. Moss called "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" "a beauty" and was "glad to have it."[37] Although committee members thought that the poem was wonderfully worked out from start to finish, they still had the usual editorial queries and corrections. Most of their concerns were on target, and their suggestions sharpened the final draft of the poem.

"A Baroque Wall-Fountain" begins with a playfully detailed verbal sketch

of the Villa Sciarra fountain that Wilbur passed daily on the way to his studio. The endlessly replenished water falling over three scalloped levels of the fountain creates a transparent tent for its mythical stone tenants—a male and female faun and their pet goose. The naïve happiness of this family wrapped in an eternal "saecular ecstasy" and the ease with which a "stocky god" holds the bottom level aloft seem too simple to represent life as human beings live it. So the narrator finds an alternative model across town among the plain fountains that Carlo Maderno designed for Saint Peter's Square.[38] He asks, "Are we not / More intricately expressed" by its main jet,

> Struggling aloft until it seems at rest
>
> In the act of rising, until
> The very wish of water is reversed,
> That heaviness borne up to burst
> In a clear, high, cavorting head, to fill
>
> With blaze, and then in gauze
> Delays, in a gnatlike shimmering, in a fine
> Illumined version of itself, decline,
> And patter on the stones its own applause?

The quietly magical lines condense the hunger for spiritual life into a brilliant, exuberant testing of itself against the law of gravity. *We are the water* is what the narrator seems to be saying here. So are those drenched fauns and their uninterrupted pleasures nothing more than a sentimental myth? He invites us to take a second look. This time we see their "humble insatiety" and are led to consider Saint Francis of Assisi, who saw God's hand in the natural, physical phenomena of our world—from birds and animals to water and stones—and interpreted them to be as much God's children as we are:

> Francis, perhaps, who lay in sister snow
>
> Before the wealthy gate
> Freezing and praising, might have seen in this
> No trifle, but a shade of bliss—
> That land of tolerable flowers, that state
>
> As near and far as grass
> Where eyes become the sunlight, and the hand
> Is worthy of water: the dreamt land
> Toward which all hungers leap, all pleasures pass.

Early eighteenth-century fountain in the garden of the Villa Sciarra, which inspired Wilbur's poem "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra." *Courtesy of Richard Wilbur.*

"A Baroque Wall-Fountain" suggests the existence of a bliss as truly humble as the one Saint Francis imagined: a level in which human beings accept kinship with the blameless but God-created things of our world—the water and grass and sunlight that might be undervalued as inanimate. Analogous use of this saint's sense of kinship also animates "For the New Railway Station," where the "least shard of the world sings out / In stubborn joy" at the astonishing rebuilding project that culminates in the construction of heaven from human imagination and earthly materials. Both endings move quietly through well-prepared and well-argued revelations toward final resolutions in which seemingly discordant ways of living reconcile. Wilbur imagined his paradise, but the materials with which he built it are, as his poems insist, things of a world he shares, not imposes.

Frailty and Fulfillment in the Roman Spring

Spring blossomed as Wilbur's fellowship year drew to a close. The Rome he was experiencing now had little in common with the place he'd entered with the 36th Texans more than ten years earlier, when the American Fifth Army liberated the city. Yet the academy's location on the Gianicolo, where his division had rested overnight before chasing the retreating Germans northward, and its proximity to the Via Aurelia, the dangerous route he had traveled with the Signal Company, were surely constant reminders, even subliminally, of the war.

From his studio nestled against the Aurelian Wall Wilbur could look across to the tennis courts on the lawn of the southern side of the main academy building. Tennis, which he had played all his life, was a reliable, blood-pumping stress reliever and a welcome distraction from his daily routine. But one evening at home, after he had played too many sets on a sweltering spring afternoon, he suddenly staggered and fell, feeling sick and dizzy and suffering severe heart palpitations. Franca, the housekeeper, witnessed his collapse and ran into the children's bedroom, exclaiming, "Tua Papa e morto!"[39] Wilbur was in fact conscious but obviously stricken. Charlee immediately suspected a post-exertion heart attack and phoned their doctor at the nearby Salvatore Mundi Hospital. He was on duty and unable to leave, but Wilbur seemed to be rallying. So Charlee sat with him until the doctor could make a house call.

The doctor diagnosed Wilbur's condition as anginaloid syndrome—not a true heart attack but a heart spasm caused by "extreme fatigue and tension."[40] He suggested that the tension, exacerbated by the intensity of writing and working, had been building ever since World War II. Charlee concurred; she was fully aware that her racehorse had been driving himself in the belief that his body was indestructible. Finally, it seemed, the stress of so much exertion and accomplishment had caught up with him.

For five days Wilbur recuperated in hospital. An electrocardiogram found no damage to his heart. His doctor's recommendations for avoiding a more serious episode were strict. No smoking. No tennis for a while. Limit writing time. Take it easy and stop often when climbing back up the 424 steps that led from the Gianicolo and the Wilbur's apartment down to Trastevere and Rome's center. "He did allow me," Wilbur remembered with rueful humor, "to continue having sexual relations with my wife."[41]

Though he did not follow the doctor's advice for long, the incident had

a profound effect on Wilbur. First came the shock of having, for the first time, been really afraid for his life. As Charlee later explained to Brinnin, the episode pushed him to think of himself as newly susceptible to frailties of the body. He was now beginning "to look at other people more closely," she said. At the same time she felt sure he knew now how much he really needed her. She was glad the episode had happened, she told Brinnin, and hoped that Dick would begin "to live naturally closer to the ground"—that is, more connected to the people he would need and to those who would need him.[42]

That spring, the evidence that Wilbur's wartime traumas were occupying his mind had surfaced in a moment of disorientation when he and Charlee were visiting the novelist Elizabeth Spencer in her apartment on Via Flaminia.[43] Writing about the evening in his journal a few years later, he remembered:

> I elected to drink Martinis and was taken drunk, babbling so foolishly that I never returned to retrieve the pipe which I mislaid there. For several minutes at least, as I recall, I entertained my hostess by dilating on my own character; then, noticing that her eyes had widened, I realized I had informed her both that I was timorous and that I was intrepid. "Elizabeth," I exclaimed, "I'm lying!" But perhaps I was not. It's true that in 1952, picking apples in Corrales with George Manierre, I suddenly lost my nerve and simply could not crawl out onto a high branch to harvest it, though a fall would scarcely have killed me. On the other hand, as our landing-craft moved towards the San Raphael beach where we *might* have met resistance, and many were ducking and shaking and praying round about us, Jim Kenney and I chatted and cracked jokes, feeling perfectly capable and calm. It's enough to make one think in terms of the Greek gods' dealings with man—now empowering, now forsaking. Still, in a rough way one averages out to be predictable in many things, and in a few things, for all practical purposes, absolute: I am absolutely unimaginative in mathematics; I am frightened of speaking impromptu, on most subjects, to any large body; I do not consciously lie; I am heterosexual; I am punctual; I believe in God; I am behind in my correspondence.[44]

In his journal he noted that the strange evening had jarred him to speculate on the treacherousness of human nature and the possibility that "all statements about characteristics are lies." He wondered if the Harvard psychologist Henry Murray's theory of apperception was correct—that subjective processes shape human behavior. The theory had led Murray to

believe, as Wilbur wrote, that "we may soon dispense with the concept of personality."[45]

By early June the doctor thought that Wilbur had recovered enough from his anginaloid episode to travel. At the time Wayland Young had been assigned to do a piece for the *Observer* about Padre Pio (1887–1968), a Catholic priest with an immense popular following, who even in the 1950s was a betting man's candidate for early sainthood.[46] Young and his wife suggested that Dick and Charlee might like to accompany them to Apulia, south of Rome, to see the priest in action. In 2006 Wilbur recalled the trip in a letter to his old friend from Rome, Bill Macdonald:

> We stayed at a hotel called Santa Marie delle Grazie, where a bell rang in every room at 4 a.m. to turn people out for the Mass at which the Padre would officiate. There were many pilgrims, and attendees at the Mass overflowed the chapel. Monks admonished an excited pilgrim for climbing up on the holy-water font. An old woman shimmied up my back and cried "Eccolo! Eccolo!" One thing that impressed both Charlee and me was that in the midst of all that sweat and fervor the air was fresh and sweet.[47]

Pio's qualifications for sainthood were numerous—among them, his stigmata, his miraculous healings, and, as Wilbur described it, "a capacity for bilocation." At the close of his next letter to Macdonald, he joked about striving to top the saint's achievement: "As for me, I am sometimes in two places at once but shall not settle for less than ubiquity."[48]

On another occasion the Wilburs drove south to Positano on the Amalfi coast, where they enjoyed ten days of sun, sea, and companionable isolation without the children. Charlee compared Dick's happiness and exhilaration in Amalfi to his behavior when the family first arrived in Rome, at a moment when he was exulting in his freedom from academic duties and his ability to write with abandon. Now he was doubly relieved, to have produced poems brilliant enough to justify his fellowship and to have finished translating *The Misanthrope*.[49] The release of those pressures allowed them to enjoy their last weeks in Italy. In 2005, as she recalled their Rome year, Charlee spoke with some regret as she alluded to the different "roads" by which she and Dick had approached the experience: "Looking back on that year I think he shortchanged himself terribly. He concentrated as he always does on the fellowship year of work, on discharging the obligations he set for himself that year." Yet she knew it was "hopelessly impossible" to change his conscientious and industrious nature.[50]

On June 9 the Macdonalds hosted a farewell party for the Wilburs and several other friends who were leaving Rome. On June 13 Dick, Charlee, and the children boarded the *Cristoforo Colombo* in Naples, and the family arrived in New York City on June 21. They stayed briefly with Helen and Lawrence in North Caldwell and by July were settled in their house in Wellesley, where Wilbur would start a new teaching job at the college in September. During his time in Rome Wilbur had lifted his poetry to a new place—one where the world's resilience and bounty were not suspect but manifest; where his poems could establish bonds of pleasure and exhilaration with his readers; where squalor, failure, pain, and misery occurred within a cosmic order and thus reminded his readers they were not alone.