

**“As Wulfstan Said on Another Occasion”:**

**The Political Poems of Richard Wilbur**

Brian Abel Ragen

In the year 1014 Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, delivered a sermon warning the English of the consequences of their wickedness. Those of us who went through graduate school in the days when literary theory was not required but Old English was may recall trying to construe the “Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos” in Bright’s Old English Reader. The “Sermon of the Wolf to the English” is perhaps not one of the greatest of sermons in the western tradition, even if it did give students a chance to get used to eths, thorns, ashes—and case endings—before plunging into Beowulf and becoming distracted by the monsters and the dragons. The archbishop’s work, repetitive as it may be, is one of the great landmarks in a certain sub-set of the sermon genre: the Jeremiad. As clearly as the American Puritans after the early fervor of their errand into the wilderness had grown cold or John Keble as the Oxford Movement grew warm, he knew what caused the people’s ills: national apostasy.

Wulfstan addresses many evils in the course of his sermon. The modern reader may think he is a bit heavy on the people neglecting their tithes or indulging in such innocent pastimes as fornication and adultery. On the other hand, he is heavy on other ills, such as selling people into slavery—and even on mistreating slaves. It is easy to see how the sermon helped create an atmosphere that allowed the archbishop’s namesake, St. Wulfstan, to put an end to slave trading in Bristol later in the century—or at least to begin a moratorium on that city’s prime trade that lasted until the advance of civilization allowed it to resume operations on a global scale. But the sin that Wulfstan returns to again and again as both cause and consequence of the nation’s ills is faithlessness—and not faithlessness to God alone. Rather, the violation of oaths and pledges and the failure to show loyalty to those to whom it is due are the great crimes. Faithlessness had led to

the betrayal and murder of King Edward, to the exile of King Æthelred, and to the domination of the nation by the Danes and other pirates. (He mentions that two or three can drive hordes before them into slavery.) And if the English do not wish to face the fate of the Britons, Wulfstan suggests that they “order words and deeds justly, and cleanse [their] thoughts with zeal, and keep oaths and pledges carefully, and have some loyalty between [them] without evil practice.”

It is hard to think of a society less like the England that faced the Viking invasions than the United States of the 1950's. Europe had recently known the “predatory bands and hunger,” the “burning and bloodshed in every district,” that Wulfstan describes, but Americans had been spared that. Nor did they need fear anyone coming, like the Vikings, to “ravage [...] burn, plunder and rob.” All the same, Americans could be frightened by the foreigner, and American poets responded to their fear. The early 1950's were, of course, the era of McCarthyism, when the fear of Communist infiltration came close to the level of hysteria. Joseph McCarthy was not the only politician who built a career on fear; perhaps an even more successful one was Pat McCarran, a Democratic United States senator from Nevada—where the airport in Las Vegas bears his name. He is famous for two pieces of legislation: The Internal Security Act of 1950, which among other things required the registration of Communists and banned the entry into the country of members of “totalitarian” groups, and the McCarran-Walters Act of 1952, which banned the immigration of “subversives” and allowed their deportation even after they became American citizens. Both were widely seen as efforts to keep left-wing European intellectuals out of the United States.

Richard Wilbur responded to McCarran's legislative victories, based, as they are, on the fear of the invader, with a poem that invokes Wulfstan. It is, like most of Wilbur's work, a carefully constructed poem whose form and content are carefully matched. While Wilbur does not in this poem employ the traditional Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter, complete with its balanced half-lines, as he does in other poems, such as “Junk” and

“Lilacs,” he does use an accentual meter and diction that invokes the Anglo-Saxon age. And he echoes Wulfstan’s warning that the violation of bonds of loyalty is part of a national apostasy that merits a nation’s punishment.

The first line of the poem both sets the tone of a political speech and surprises the reader by reminding him that “the present crisis” is not a new one:

As Wulfstan said on another occasion,  
The strong net bellies in the wind and the spider rides it out;  
But history, that sure blunderer,  
Ruins the unkempt web, however silver.

I am not speaking of rose windows  
Shattered by bomb-shock; the leads tousled; the glass-grains broadcast;  
If the rose be living at all  
A gay gravel shall be pollen of churches.

In these two stanzas, Wilbur draws on both an image from the natural world—the spider web that must constantly be kept in repair—and an image that unites nature and culture—the rose window. The first is used to make the same point another 20<sup>th</sup>-century poet with a memory of the Viking invasions did. Just as G.K. Chesterton compares the unending task of maintaining civilization with the constant weeding that has kept the Uffington “White Horse” figure visible in the chalk downs of southern England for two millennia, Wilbur compares the task of defending civilization from blundering history to the spider’s constant repair of its seemingly fragile web.

But the question Wilbur next raises is, what is civilization? And who are its enemies? As a veteran of campaigns in Africa, Italy, and France during World War II, he was familiar with one kind of threat to civilization: the material one that destroyed churches and railway networks. But those are not his subject here, because physical damage can be repaired: new churches will grow from the ruins of the old if the faith is truly living. The real threat, instead, is a moral one:

Nor do I mean railway networks.  
Torn up tracks are no great trouble. As Wulfstan said,  
It is oathbreach, faithbreach, lovebreach

Bring the invaders into the estuaries.

Shall one man drive before him ten  
Unstrung from sea to sea? Let thought be free. I speak  
Of the spirit's weaving, the neural  
Web, the self-true mind, the trusty reflex.

The spider web that must finally be kept in order is the individual soul and mind. And what will rip it apart is not the exterior threat, but the temptation to injustice. In a reversal of Wulfstan, the one man who drives ten before him is not the invader: it is the speaker's own audience. Since the McCarran Act prevented "displaced persons" from finding refuge in America, the "one" that drove the ten before him is the government of the United States.

Wilbur's poem is clearly a political poem, and indeed a protest poem. It is not, however, what many audiences in the 1950's, much less the 1960's, thought of when those terms came to mind. The natural form for poems of protest seemed, to some, the deliberately unpolished productions of the Beat poets, such as Allen Ginsberg, whose "Howl" and "America" made such an impression. Wilbur himself dismissed the idea that the world of poetry wasn't big enough for both sorts of writing when interviewers brought it up. He also probably saw that the Beats and other free verse protest poets were not as rebellious in purely literary terms as they may have seemed to those less familiar with the traditions of vers libre and Dadaism that had been prominent in the more estoteric of literary circles for almost half a century or, still more importantly, with the model of Walt Whitman that Ginsberg and the Beats consciously adopted. In many ways, it was the new generation of formalists who emerged after World War II, including Anthony Hecht and James Merrill, who were the true innovators. But Wilbur has been pestered throughout his career with questions suggesting that the formal perfection of a poem is at odds with genuine political engagement. One interviewer, for example, asked if "your poetry's aesthetic perfection is at odds with our own nuclear age." Wilbur responded,

Beauty in art is a byproduct of adequacy to the subject, is it not? [...] If the technique properly serves the words, the argument[,] then the words are the clearer and the stronger for it. Thomas Nashe, writing in a time of pestilence, did not feel that his verse should be accordingly spotty. Would my poem “Advice to a Prophet” deal better with the threat of nuclear war if it were “sincerely” incoherent and dispensed with all supporting artifice? Nope. There is a goofy argument going around, to the effect that metrical writing tempts one to make strong closures, and that strong closures are fraudulent in an age of doubt and confusion. To which I can only say that poets are not bound to conform to anyone else’s notion of the age, and that a few iambs and trochees never led an able poet to say more than he meant. (Butts 261)

I myself find that Wilbur’s assertion is supported not only by the evidence of his own work, but also by that of poets such as Anthony Hecht. Is there a better description of the doubt and confusion of the nuclear age than the perfect quatrains of “It Out Herods Herod; Pray You Avoid It”? And the skills of a formal poet can reach audiences that would not sit still for the “barbaric yawp” of a Whitmanesque poet. The most memorable artistic protest directed at the excesses of the McCarthy era is doubtless Arthur Miller’s legitimate play The Crucible. But a close second would be the musical Candide, with Leonard Bernstein’s score and a book and lyrics by several hands, including Wilbur’s. While the objects of satire in that version of Voltaire are many, the auto-da-fé scene is clearly directed at Senator McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee.

The poem that Wilbur mentions in the defense of formalism I have just quoted, “Advice to a Prophet,” has as part of its subject the limits of the rant, the Jeremiad, and the unfocused wail. Those we can ignore:

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,  
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,  
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us  
In God’s name to have self-pity,  
  
Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,  
The long numbers that rocket the mind;  
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,  
Unable to fear what is too strange.  
  
Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.  
How should we dream of this place without us?—

The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,  
A stone look on the stone's face?

The speaker does not deny the truth of the “prophet’s” warning. It is, after all, obviously true, but nonetheless easy to ignore, since it speaks of the unimaginable: our own absence. The strategy the speaker suggests is a bit less direct. It is, however, one that will be familiar to any of you who have seen Al Gore’s new movie, An Inconvenient Truth. While Gore does give plenty of numbers and shows lots of slides of suffering human beings, he devotes a great deal of time—and a good deal of computer animation—to a polar bear. Most of us have an unnatural affection for polar bears, enjoy the pictures of them dancing in National Geographic, and regret that their enclosures at the zoo are not more commodious. But whether there actually are big, white, furry omnivores at the top of the world really doesn’t matter as much to our lives as do things like the spread of malaria-bearing mosquitoes or the weakening of the ocean current that keeps Scotland from being as chilly as Labrador. Yet Gore shows us an anthropomorphized polar bear breaking through the melting ice pack, swimming ever longer distances in search of secure footing, and finally being lost in a world that is now entirely blue, not white. The bear’s plight we can imagine. We might even do something about it.

Or at least that is Gore’s hope. And it is the essence of the advice Wilbur’s speaker gives:

Speak of the world’s own change. Though we cannot conceive  
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost  
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,  
How the view alters. We could believe,

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip  
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy  
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,  
The Jack pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn  
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout  
Stunned in a twinkling.

The prospect of the loss of the natural world, which is imaginable since we lose bits of it as part of its own cycles, will move us more. I will not say the strategy Wilbur suggests has been effective, but it has certainly been used by a number of writers since the publication of Wilbur's poem. One of the characters in Vikram Seth's verse novel The Golden Gate echoes it, as did Jonathan Schell in his once widely-read book, The Fate of the Earth. And Al Gore talks not just about polar bears: he also wonders what we will do without toads.

During the 1960's Wilbur marched and leafleted and read poems at protests against the war in Vietnam. The war is the open subject of only a few poems, however, and I have time only to discuss two. They are both occasional poems, one full of scorn, the other a call for compassion.

The poem full of scorn and indignation is "A Miltonic Sonnet for Mr. Johnson on His Refusal of Peter Hurd's Official Portrait." The occasion is explained in the title: President Johnson in fact declared his portrait "the ugliest thing I ever saw," meaning about what Winston Churchill meant when he called his portrait by Graham Sutherland "a remarkable piece of modern art." (Lady Bird Johnson did not, like Clementine Churchill, ease her husband's mind by burning the offending image, and Hurd's painting now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington.) Wilbur has claimed that he wrote the poem before seeing the painting, though the reference to the brightness of the Capitol building in the background suggests otherwise. It is certainly true, however, that the poem's subject is not Johnson's taste in art, or even his manners as a patron. Rather, it is the war in Vietnam:



Heir to the office of a man not dead  
Who drew our Declaration up, who planned  
Range and Rotunda with his drawing-hand  
And harbored Palestrina in his head,  
Who would have wept to see small nations dread  
The imposition of our cattle-brand,  
With public truth at home mistold or banned,  
And in whose term no army's blood was shed,  
  
Rightly you say the picture is too large  
Which Peter Hurd by your appointment drew,  
And justly call the Capitol too bright  
Which signifies our people in your charge;  
Wait, Sir, and see how time will render you,  
Who talk of vision but are weak of sight.

I am not sure this poem has worn well, since its indignation seems as much directed to Johnson's style as an inarticulate Texan as to his misguided prosecution of a dubious war. (The temptation to conflate the two things does seem to be a perennial problem in American political discourse.) The contrast between Johnson and Thomas Jefferson, the founder of the Democratic Party LBJ now headed, is as much one between a cosmopolitan intellectual who dabbled in architecture and music and a cattle-rancher as between a president who avoid war and one who escalated war. (And there is, of course, no mention of the contrast between a slaveholder and the moving force behind the Civil Rights Act.) The reference to the immortal Jefferson as "a man not dead" immediately brings to mind the dead man whose office Johnson inherited, John Kennedy, another cosmopolitan and patron of the arts.

Yet this poem, which Wilbur says he wrote in a single day and hasn't revised because "A poem of scorn [...] is not to be revised some years later," is almost a compendium of cleverly used poetic devices. The octave describes Johnson through contrasting him with Jefferson, in personal qualities in the first quatrain and then in public acts in the second. The sestet applies those qualities to the current situation, and then makes the portrait a symbol of the legacy it represents. The "turn" between octave and sestet is marked metrically with an initial trochee, and the rest of the poem is full of



equally appropriate metrical variations. If I were, like a student writing an exam, trying to show my mastery of literary terms, I could start with alliteration and anaphora and work my way through the rest of the glossary. By the time I got to the “D’s” and mentioned that the diction ranges from the Johnsonian—Samuel Johnsonian—“Wait, Sir,” to the cowboy’s cattle brand, I would have filled the blue book. Sadly, I think all the technical elements in this poem of scorn only work if one holds a very uncomplicated view of LBJ. It does not provoke thought; it shuts it off.

That is not what most of the poems in which Wilbur addresses politics do. Another quickly written occasional poem from the Vietnam era in fact suggests that the caricatured images of those we disagree with is one of the obstacles to understanding that must be overcome. “For the Student Strikers” was written in 1970 when students at Wesleyan University were boycotting classes in protest of the war and canvassing the neighboring city of Middletown, Connecticut—not then a particularly anti-war community.

Go talk with those who are rumored to be unlike you,  
And whom, it is said, you are so unlike.  
Stand on the stoops of their houses and tell them why  
You are out on strike.

It is not yet time for the rock, the bullet, the blunt  
Slogan that fuddles the mind toward force.  
Let the new sound in our street be the patient sound  
Of your discourse.

.....

They are your houses; the people are not unlike you;  
Talk with them, then, and let it be done  
Even for the grey wife of your nightmare sheriff  
And the guardsman’s son.

I could again use this poem as a compendium of examples of poetic devices. But instead of talking about how the curtailed final lines recall Browning and Sappho, it seems more worthwhile to think about how this poem challenges its audience. Its first audience, the students who asked for a poem in their support, were challenged to such an extent that they threw it in the trash and only retrieved it and printed it on second thought. But it also

challenges the sort of person who is likely to read it in a book of poems. That reader is likely to be egalitarian in his political rhetoric, but to think himself to have no kinship with the working class conservatives whom the 60's Left dismissed as "hard hats," much less with sheriffs, with national guardsman, or, indeed, with men for whom a cattle-brand is tool, not a metaphor.

In recent years, Wilbur has not written many political poems, though his earlier ones have sadly become topical again, as the Patriot Act has reintroduced the restrictions on visits to the United States by foreign intellectuals and the threat of the devastation of the world through global warming has necessitated the missions of more unheeded prophets. Yet the very warning he echoed from Wulfstan at the beginning of his career has also become one adopted with such heartless literalism that Wilbur has had to retract it. The pitiless invaders, he has had to declare, are not a punishment for our sins. When asked for a poem about September 11, Wilbur responded by writing,

The only thing I can say right now is this. There is no excuse for the cold inhumanity of 11 September, and there is no excuse for those Americans, whether of the left or the religious right, who say that we had it coming to us. (qtd. in Wieseltier)

In the clarity and decency of that declaration, Wilbur echoes the heart of the message he has tried to convey for a half century: in a real but not literal sense, it is indeed oathbreach, faithbreach, lovebreach that brings the invaders into the estuaries. Those estuaries, of course, are not in the Hudson River, but in our minds and hearts.

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