Buried strangeness

by Jill Peláez Baumgaertner in the May 24, 2000 issue

Mayflies: New Poems and Translations, by Richard Wilbur

Richard Wilbur, a former poet laureate and winner of the National Book Award, two Pulitzer Prizes and every other major literary award this country offers, is arguably America's greatest living poet. That he is also a poet with a theology is a well-kept secret among critics. A lay reader in the Episcopal Church, Wilbur has said that most of what he knows of scripture comes through exposure to the Book of Common Prayer. He has claimed that despite "sometimes happily think[ing] and feel[ing] within the terms of Anglican liturgy," he is not actually very "catechistic."

Despite these disclaimers, however, he weaves scriptural story and the Christian doctrines of grace, incarnation and resurrection into many of his poems. That these concerns seem to be intimately connected with his ideas about the imagination and about metaphor suggests that Wilbur's aesthetic is strongly incarnational. Therefore, anyone interested in the intersections of theology and art may approach this new volume of poems--his first since the 1989 publication of *New and Collected Poems*--with high expectations.

In almost every poem Wilbur uncovers the "buried strangeness/ Which nourishes the known." It may be the strangeness of a dream, of falling asleep, of a hole in the parlor floor, or of the way laundry hanging outside one's window makes the air appear "awash with angels." For Wilbur poetic revelation occurs through this strangeness, through metaphor, and through the natural world and its sacramental elements. Though somewhat slippery in their meanings, words are nonetheless what we have to "make our terrors bravely clear" or maybe even "to domesticate a fear."

In "Mayflies" the poet encounters a cloud of flies visible in a patch of light cast by the sinking sun. In their rise and fall, they seem "weavers of some cloth of gold,/ or the fine pistons of some bright machine." As the light wanes and the flies disappear, the poet feels isolated and separate from the rest of the natural world, but he takes consolation in the possibility that his role is to be the God-conscious viewer of creation.

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--
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.

In so many of these poems nature is similarly sacramental, full of God's presence, conveying messages, blessing viewers, revealing divine intentions.

Nearing the age of 80, Wilbur also writes about what it means to age, to be an "old rock-climber" dreaming of the scaled cliffs of his youth "or of the sort of yawning chasm, / Now far too deep, / That once, made safe by rashness, he could leap." In a lyrical set of three poems he remembers his boyhood: dinners with his family; a trip to the seaside caught in a photograph, the adults "shielding their eyes / Against the sunlight and the future's glare," the children unaware of time's flight; a car trip in 1928 through a blizzard, his mother leaning out the window with her flashlight lighting the edge of the road.

In one of the strongest poems of the collection, "For C.," Wilbur speaks of his long marriage. The first three stanzas of the poem present vignettes of the various sad partings of several pairs of lovers, and Wilbur goes on to say such dramatic moments of "tristesse," "regrets" and "despair" are not a part of their own life together.

Still, there's a certain scope in that long love
Which constant spirits are the keepers of,

And which, though taken to be tame and staid,
Is a wild sostenuto of the heart,
A passion joined to courtesy and art
Which has the quality of something made,
Like a good fiddle, like the rose's scent,
Like a rose window or the firmament.

Along with flashes of the past and glimpses of transcendence in the present moment, Wilbur also discovers new ways of looking at older texts. In his fresh (and sometimes rollicking) translations of Moliere, Dante and Baudelaire and his translations of Valeri Petrov's poems from Bulgarian and Nina Cassian's from Romanian, Wilbur is always true to the poetic forms of the original texts. In fact, all of Wilbur's poems, whether his own or translations of others', are well-set jewels--carefully crafted poems in traditional forms or using regular meter and rhyme, doing what no other poet can do so well, even the poets he chooses to translate. One suspects that the translations are better even than the originals.