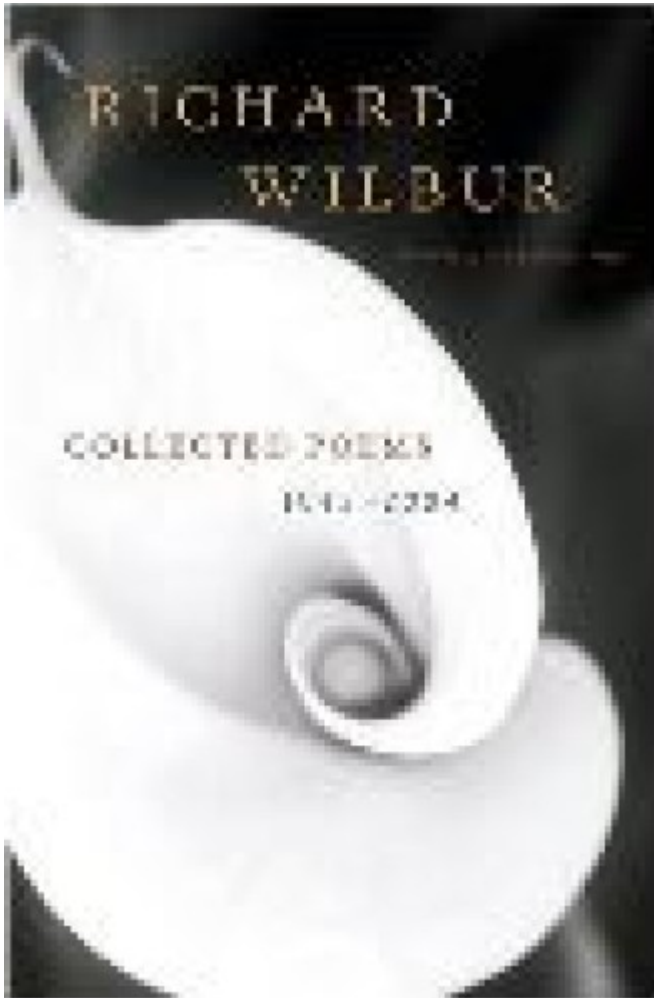


Collected Poems, 1943-2004

reviewed by [Jeff Gundy](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Collected Poems, 1943-2004

Richard Wilbur
Harcourt

The dates in the title tell of Richard Wilbur's remarkable longevity. Once a youthful prodigy, he became part of poetry anthologies 30 years ago. By now Wilbur is a

grizzled eminence, known at least vaguely to most Americans who pay any attention to poetry.

Like many poets of his generation, he wrote well-crafted formal poems in the 1940s and '50s, when conservatism dominated both poetry and politics. Unlike poets such as Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich and James Wright, however, he was not tempted by the experiments with form and subject matter that came during the '60s. Long eclipsed both by the work of his more pyrotechnic peers and by the sheer number of poets clamoring for attention, Wilbur's star may be on the rise once again as political and poetic fashions move in rough parallel and New Formalists like National Endowment for the Arts chair Dana Gioia labor to bring formal verse back into fashion.

Throughout his career Wilbur has mainly written short lyrics in neat, crisp stanzas, often rhymed, and in language that is unmistakably composed in all the senses of the word. His very early "The Beautiful Changes" is still luminous:

Your hands hold roses always in a way that says
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes
In such kind ways,
Wishing ever to sunder
Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

This is verse in the grand English-American tradition practiced by Robert Frost and E. A. Robinson, and before them by poets such as Tennyson, Wordsworth, Pope and Donne. Reading through the hundreds of original poems and translations in this handsome, hefty volume, which includes some witty children's poems as well, it is easy to envision Wilbur as one more hoary presence in that long line.

Wilbur's translations—of Dante, Moliere, Borges and others—largely reinforce the sense that he is working in a refined, even elite tradition. We find ourselves at garden parties and among speakers who wear dressing gowns and lift snifters of brandy, and at times their language and concerns seem loftily distant:

Later, however, talking with toxic zest
Of golf, or taxes, or the rest of it

Where the beaked ladle plies the chuckling ice
You may enjoy a chill of severance, hearing
Above your head the shrug of unreal wings.

The social and political upheavals of the past half-century do not pass entirely unnoticed. “For the Student Strikers,” addressed to the Wesleyan University activists of 1970, counsels patience: “It is not yet time for the rock, the bullet, the blunt / Slogan that fuddles the mind toward force.” Sensible enough—but Wilbur is perilously close to sounding like those “white moderates” who counseled Martin Luther King Jr. to be patient.

To be fair, Wilbur’s reputation has never rested on his politics, but on his eye and ear. He has long been skilled at shaping poems from those moments when the beautiful and the spiritual intersect. “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World,” with its reference to St. Augustine and its only slightly coy insistence that there are angels in the fresh laundry outside the poet’s window, retains its freshness and the breadth and depth of its final apostrophe:

Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits, keeping their difficult balance.

Wilbur’s best moments, like Frost’s, happen when his materials threaten to overwhelm his urge for order, when the struggle between civilization and wildness is not easily resolved. As the recent “A Barred Owl” shows, he still has the touch:

Words, which can make our terrors bravely clear,
Can also thus domesticate a fear,
And send a small child back to sleep at night
Not listening for the sound of stealthy flight
Or dreaming of some small thing in a claw
Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw.

The paradox is that these words leave us dreaming precisely of that small thing being eaten raw. Do such words do more to domesticate our fears or to make them clear—and which task is the more necessary? At his best, Wilbur leads us into deep

reflection on such questions and on the “difficult balance” they require.