Richard Wilbur

of S.T.C. when Alph, the sacred river, surfaced briefly in the unlikely vicinity of Baker Farm, and as quickly sank again, routed forever by the visitor whose business, intent and disposition—whether ill or well is just as immaterial—long ago sunk Lethewards, a particle of the unbottled ultimate solution.

I drank my dose, and after an afternoon prostrate, between heaves, on the coldly purgatorial tiles of the W.C. found it elysium simply to recline, sipping flat ginger beer as though it were honeydew, in that billowy bed, under pink chenille, hearing you read The Mystery of Edwin Drood! For whether the opium was worth it for John Jasper from finding being with you, even sick at Porlock, a rosily addictive picnic, I left less likely ever to recover.

3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge—his friend Charles Lamb often referred to him as "STC", "alliteration"—divine inspiration.
4. The form where Coleridge was living (see note 9); "Alph, the sacred river" appears in "Kubla Khan" (line 3).
5. That is, toward the river in Hades (classical underworld) whose waters cause forgiveness; compare also John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (line 10); and Lethewards had sunk (line 4).
6. (1) Liquid mixture, as of medicine; (2) answer (as in Adolf Hitler's attempt to exterminate the Jews as "the Final Solution").
7. That is, bliss (Elysium was the abode of the blessed dead in classical mythology); "W. C."—water-closet, Brit.) for bathroom.
8. Compare "Kubla Khan" verse nine: "For he on honeydew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise" (lines 53–54); "ginger beer" is similar to U.S. ginger ale.
9. The ravages of opium addiction, as embodied in the character of John Jasper, form a major theme of Dickens' unfinished last novel, Edwin Drood (1870). (Clampitt's note.)

RICHARD WILBUR
b. 1921

In the geography of modern verse, Richard Wilbur situates himself at an opposite pole from Robert Lowell. Possibly with this difference in mind, Lowell, accepting a National Book Award for poetry in 1960, distinguished two kinds of modern poetry, the cooked and the raw—a distinction originally made by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Wilbur's poetry is elaborately cooked, or, to elevate the metaphor, he is Apollonian while Lowell is Dionysian: that is, he centers his work in the achievement of illuminated, controlled moments rather than in sudden immersions in chaos and despair. But, just as Lowell is not merely chaotic, so Wilbur is not merely measured and self-contained. He is alive to inner challenges, and while his mode of expression is more sedate, and more dead, than Lowell's, he begins in cross-purposes and cross-sympathies even if it culminates in quintessences of a terrestrial paradise.

His serious attempts to write poetry began during the Second World War and arose out of it. As he has said, "It was not until World War II took me to Cassino, Anzio and the poetry for it one's world disorder made me to need a pe-tration with the "sighted shi-speaking of tries."

What he is title of his se he writes in extreme cussiety is clear strict poetic composition: the existent writing-proce and cleavage limitation are a bottle. In a large Muse. If he re-gation while in Wallaces difficulties, Wilbur am with which I because it bot said of poetry doxically, it cannot hear the social protest the poet not t air and water spheres, spirit

Wilbur was an artist; him for desig imagined time direction whic took a very ok has said, his t writes brilliant He worked on At Ambrose, t poems—that is

1. Twentieth C
2. Mid-Century
Richard Wilbur  

Anzie and the Siegfried Line that I began to versify in earnest. One does not use poetry for its social purposes, as a means of organizing oneself and the world, until one's life somehow gets out of hand. A general cataclysm is not required; the disorder must be personal and may be wholly so, but poetry, to be vital, does seem to need a periodic acquaintance with the threat of Chaos." Wilbur endorses organization without wanting it to be easy: so in "The Beacon" he salutes a human artifact ("sighted ship / Assemblies all the sea") while in "Caserta Garden" he cautions, in speaking of the "garden of the world," that "Its shapes escape our simpler symmetries."

What he seeks are complex symmetries, which he composes with "ceremony" (the title of his second book of verse). In case ceremony should suggest empty formalism, he writes in the title poem, not altogether persuasively, that ceremony, when most extreme, covers the most animalism. Whether animal or not, Wilbur's formal dexterity is clearly a necessary part of his self-expression. He has defended the use of strict poetic forms, traditional or invented, as being "like the use of framing and composition in painting: both serve to limit the work of art, and to declare its artificiality: they say, 'This is not the world, but a pattern imposed upon the world or found in it; this is a partial and provisional attempt to establish relations between things.'" He adds, "There are other less metaphysical reasons for preferring strictness of form: the fact, for example, that subtle variation is unrecognizable without the pre-existence of a norm; or the fact that form, in showing and complicating the writing-process, calls out the poet's full talents, and thereby insures a greater care and cleverness in the choice and disposition of words. In general, I would say that limitation makes for power: the strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle." Instead of saying, as many of his fellow-writers would, that poetry is written for a large (or small) reading-public, Wilbur maintains that it is "addressed to the Muse." If he has for the most part declined the themes of dispossession and disintegration which have occupied many poets, he has ample warranty—if any be needed—in Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore for making his verse an evocation, over difficulties, of desirable experience.

Wilbur announced in his first book two of his principal poetic interests. In "Cigales," with which The Beautiful Changes begins, he praises the song made by crickets because it both puzzles and joys, though not straightly apprehended (or as T. S. Eliot said of poetry, "not perfectly understood"), it has a healing power for others. Paradoxically, it has none for the crickets, since according to the naturalist Fabre, they cannot hear their own song. This is a bow to pure, gratuitous verse, as opposed to social protest or religious affirmation. The next poem, "Water Walker," compares the poet not to a motiveless critic, but to a caddis fly, which lives in two elements, air and water, as the poet, ironic and ambiguous, subsists at once in two atmospheres, spirit and its ground in fact.

Wilbur was born March 1, 1921, in New York City. His father, Lawrence Wilbur, was an artist; Wilbur's poem about him, "My Father Paints the Summer," praises him for disregarding the actual rain to paint a perfect summer's day, "always an imagined time." Wilbur's mother came from a family prominent in journalism, a direction which he was to follow briefly later. Two years after his birth, the family took a very old house in North Caldwell, New Jersey, and he developed there, he has said, his taste for country things; he has written a poem about the potato and writes brilliantly, as in "Seed Leaves," of plant growth—"the doom of taking shape." He worked on student newspapers at his high school and then at Amherst College. At Amherst, too, he was encouraged by his English courses to develop Horatian poems—that is, poems at once chiseled in form and rural in setting. After the war he

3. The same, p. 2.
took an M.A. at Harvard and was elected a member of the Society of Fellows, where
for three years he devoted himself to verse. He then taught at Harvard (1950–54),
Wellesley (1955–57), and at Wesleyan; in 1987 he left his position as writer-in-resi-
dence at Smith to become Poet Laureate of the United States, succeeding Robert
Penn Warren. Besides five small volumes of verse Wilbur has made splendid transla-
tion of Molière’s *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, and of Racine’s *Phèdre*. With Lil-
lian Hellman he wrote lyrics for a comic opera, *Candide*, based on Voltaire’s novel.
In the wit and form of these French originals his talent finds an obvious kinship.

Wilbur’s poetry labors to express “the splendor of mere being” (“For Dudley”) when “every moment is the quick of time” (“Complaint”). But he does not therefore fail to make minute discriminations among “things of this world,” a title he gave to his third book. Like Yeats or Ransom, he poses a running controversy between abstraction and “my opulent bric-a-brac earth” (“On the Eyes of an SS Officer”). Abstraction may take the form of Euclidean geometry—bare circles—or Hitlerite murderousness—“iced or ashen” eyes. He prefers “the true, the mortal flower” to “roses of the mind” (“La Rose des Vents”). In “Clearness” he berates “the town of my mind’s exacted vision” as nothing but “Thou of the mind’s worst vanity.” On the other hand, things of this world are not so solid and substantial as they look: “cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones” (“Epistemology”). Another aspect of this world is that it offers what Wilbur calls, in an essay on Emily Dickinson (another Amherst poet), “sumptuous destitution.” It never fully satisfies the spirit which has, like the olive tree, a thirst “exceeding all excess” (“Grasse: The Olive Trees”). This theme is con-
tinued in other poems: Wilbur’s “Ballade for the Duke of Orleans” declares, “I die of thirst, here at the fountain-side”; “A Voice from Under the Table” announces, “The end of thirst exceeds experience.” In darker moods, Wilbur attributes to things a doubleness like that in the poet. An early poem, “Violet and Jasper,” sees the turnip-town of Cambridge “suddenly streaming with blood,” and a later one, “The Lilacs,” finds “The depth and dumbness of death’s kingdom” to be suggested by “the pure power of this perfume.” Sumptuousness is much more prominent in Wilbur’s work than destitution, but both elements can be seen there.

The Pardon

My dog lay dead five days without a grave
In the thick of summer, hid in a clump of pine
And a jungle of grass and honeysuckle-vine.
I who had loved him while he kept alive

Went only close enough to where he was
To sniff the heavy honeysuckle-smell
Twined with another odor heavier still
And hear the flies’ intolerable buzz.

Well, I was ten and very much afraid.
In my kind world the dead were out of range
And I could not forgive the sad or strange
In beast or man. My father took the spade.

And buried him. Last night I saw the grass
Slowly divide (it was the same scene
But now it glowed a fierce and mortal green)
And saw the dog emerging. I confess

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Grasse: The Olive Trees

I felt afraid again, but still he came
In the carnal sun, clothed in a hymn of flies,
And death was breeding in his lively eyes.
I started in to cry and call his name;

Asking forgiveness of his tongueless head.
. . . I dreamt the past was never past redeeming;
But whether this was false or honest dreaming
I beg death's pardon now. And mourn the dead.

Grasse:¹ The Olive Trees

For Marcelle and Ferdinand Springer

Here luxury's the common lot. The light
Lies on the rain-pecked rocks like yellow wool
And around the rocks the soil is rusty bright
From too much wealth of water, so that the grass
Mashes under the foot, and all is full
Of heat and juice and a heavy jammed excess.

Whatever moves moves with the slow complete
Gestures of statuary. Flower smells
Are set in the golden day, and shelled in heat,
Fine and columnar cypress stand. The palm
Sinks its combs in the sky. This whole South swells
To a soft rigor, a rich and crowded calm.

Only the olive contradicts. My eye,
Traveling slopes of rust and green, arrests
And rests from plenitude where olives lie
Like clouds of doubt against the earth's array.
Their faint disheveled foliage divests
The sunlight of its color and its sway.

Not that the olive spurns the sun; its leaves
Scatter and point to every part of the sky,
Like famished fingers waving. Brilliance weaves
And sombers down among them, and among
The anxious silver branches, down to the dry
And twisted trunk, by rooted hunger wrung.

Even when seen from near, the olive shows
A hue of far away. Perhaps for this
The dove brought olive back, a tree which grows
Unearthly pale, which ever dims and dries,
And whose great thirst, exceeding all excess,
Teaches the South it is not paradise.

¹ Grasse is a city in southern France.
Richard Wilbur

Still, Citizen Sparrow

Still, citizen sparrow, this vulture which you call 
Unnatural, let him but lumber again to air 
Over the rotten office, let him bear 
The carrion ballast up, and at the tail

Tip of the sky lie cruising. Then you'll see 
That no more beautiful bird is in heaven's height, 
No wider more placid wings, no watchfuler flight; 
He shoulders nature there, the rightfully free,

The naked-headed one. Pardon him, you
Who dart in the orchard aisles, for it is he 
Devours death, mocks mutability, 
Has heart to make an end, keeps nature new.

Thinking of Noah, childheart, try to forget 
How for so many bedlam hours his saw 
Soured the song of birds with its wheezy gnaw, 
And the slam of his hammer all the day beset

The people's ears. Forget that he could bear 
To see the towns like coral under the keel, 
And the fields so dismal deep. Try rather to feel 
How high and weary it was, on the waters where

He rocked his only world, and everyone's. 
Forgive the hero, you who would have died 
Glady with all you knew; he rode that tide 
To Ararat; all men are Noah's sons.

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 heartshaped leaves, in a dim, 
Low, and a final glade.

The rare original heartsblood goes, 
Spends on 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,

2. A mountain in the Caucasus where Noah's ark came to rest. 
3. This poem, according to Wilbur, is "the only instance in which I went straight from something that happened to me to writing a poem about it, with very little violation of the actual circumstances, though I put more into it before I was through than I'd felt at the time."
"A World Without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness"

Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies. 4
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.

Ceremony

A striped blouse in a clearing by Bazille 5
Is, you may say, a patroness of boughs
Too queenly kind toward nature to be kin.
But ceremony never did conceal,
Save to the silly eye, which all allows,
How much we are the woods we wander in.

Let her be some Sabrina 6 fresh from stream,
Lucent as shallows slowed by wading sun,
Bedded on fern, the flowers' cynosure.
Then nymph and wood must nod and strive to dream
That she is airy earth, the trees, undone,
Must ape her languor natural and pure.

Ho-hum. I am for wit and wakefulness,
And love this feigning lady by Bazille.
What's lightly hid is deepest understood,
And when with social smile and formal dress
She teaches leaves to curtsy and quadrille,
I think there are most tigers in the wood.

"A World Without Objects
Is a Sensible Emptiness" 7

The tall camels of the spirit
Steer for their deserts, passing the last groves loud
With the sawmill shrill of the locust, to the whole honey of the arid
Sun. They are slow, proud,

4. Wilbur, asked about this word, replied: "I may have found it in John Donne in the first place, but I think I wanted to use it here as a kind of confession that I'm doing rather a lot with that word. I'm turning him into the primal energies of the world in the course of this poem. And so I get a little bombastic as a way of acknowledging that I'm going farther. Amphibia is imagined as the presiding spirit of the toad's (and of all amphibian) universe.

5. Frédéric Bazille (1841–1870), French painter associated with the Impressionists. Most of his paintings show figures in close association with a landscape.

6. The nymph of the river Severn, in Milton's Comus, but here identified with thoughtless, uncumberous nature, and contrasted with Amphibia's lady.

7. The title comes from Thomas Traherne (c. 1635–1674), Second Century, Meditation 60: "You are as prone to love as the sun is to shine; it being the most delightful and natural employment of the soul of man, without which you are dark and miserable. ... For certainly he that delights not in love makes vain the universe. ... The whole world ministers to you as the theatre of your love. It sustains you and all objects that you may continue to love them. Without which it were better for you to have no being. Life without objects is sensible emptiness, and that is a greater misery than death or nothing."
Richard Wilbur

And move with a stilted stride,
To the land of sheer horizon, hunting Traherne's
Sensible emptiness, there where the brain's lantern-slide
Revels in vast returns.

O connoisseurs of thirst,
Beasts of my soul who long to learn to drink
Of pure mirage, those prosperous islands are accurst
That shimmer on the brink

Of absence; auras, lustres,
And all shinnings need to be shaped and borne.
Think of those painted saints, capped by the early masters
With bright, jauntily-worn

Aureate plates, or even
Merry-go-round rings. Turn, O turn
From the fine sleights of the sand, from the long empty oven
Where flames in flaming burn

Back to the trees arrayed
In bursts of glare, to the halo-dial's run
Of the country creeks, and the hills' bracken tiaras made
Gold in the sunken sun,

Wisely watch for the sight
Of the supernova burgeoning over the barn,
Lampshone blurred in the steam of beasts, the spirit's right
Oasis, light incarnate.

Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
As false dawn.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

8. Mirages.
9. Like a sundial, the light on the creeks forms a halo-dial which reflects the solar changes.
1. Astronomers now believe that the star of Bethlehem, a symbol of Christ's birth, was a supernova, an exploding star.
2. The title is quoted from St. Augustine. "You must imagine the poem as occurring at perhaps seven-thirty in the morning, the scene is a bedroom lit up in a city apartment building; outside the bedroom window, the first laundry of the day is being yanked across the sky and one has been awakened by the squeaking pulleys of the laundry-line" (Wilbur, in Poets in Progress, New York, 1966, p. 166).
Pangloss's Song

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water, and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rare a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,
And cries,

"Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven."

Yet, as the sun acknowledges
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,

"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."

Pangloss's Song

Dear boy, you will not hear me speak
With sorrow or with rancor
Of what has paled my rosy cheek
And blasted it with canker;

"Twas Love, great Love, that did the deed
Through Nature's gentle laws,
And how should ill effects proceed
From so divine a cause?

Sweet honey comes from bees that sting,
As you are well aware;
To one adept in reasoning,
Whatever pains disease may bring
Are but the tangy seasoning
To Love's delicious fare.

3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-3. "Plato, St. Theresa, and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian. Augustine says that it is love that brings us back. This is why the love of line 35 has got to be bitter..." (Wili-
Richard Wilbur

II

Columbus and his men, 'tis said,
Conveyed the virus hither
Whereby my features rot away
And vital powers wither;
Yet had they not traversed the seas
And come infected back,
Why, think of all the luxuries
That modern life would lack!

All bitter things conduce to sweet,
As this example shows;
Without the little spirochet
We'd have no chocolate to eat,
Nor would tobacco's fragrance greet
The European nose.

III

Each nation guards its native land
With cannon and with sentry,
Inspectors look for contraband
At every port of entry,
Yet nothing can prevent the spread
Of Love's divine disease:
It rounds the world from bed to bed
As pretty as you please.

Men worship Venus everywhere,
As plainly may be seen;
The decorations which I bear
Are nobler than the Croix de Guerre,
And gained in service of our fair
And universal Queen.

Playboy

High on his stockroom ladder like a dance
The stock-boy sits, and studies like a sage
The subject matter of one glossy page,
As lost in curves as Archimedes once.

Sometimes, without a glance, he feeds himself.
The left hand, like a mother-bird in flight,
Brings him a sandwich for a sidelong bite,
And then returns it to a dusty shelf.

What so engrosses him? The wild décor
Of this pink-papered alcove into which

5. (c.287–212 B.C.), Greek mathematician and inventor, known for his invention of a tubular helix, or screw, used to lift water from the hold of a ship.
6. Upper edge of a boat
7. Here, poetic image
A naked girl has stumbled, with its rich
Welter of pelts and pillows on the floor,

Amidst which, kneeling in a supple pose,
She lifts a goblet in her farther hand,
As if about to toast a flower-stand
Above which hovers an exploding rose

Fired from a long-necked crystal vase that rests
Upon a tasseled and vermillion cloth
One taste of which would shrivel up a moth?
Or is he pondering her perfect breasts?

Nothing escapes him of her body's grace
Or of her floodlit skin, so sleek and warm
And yet so strangely like a uniform,
But what now grips his fancy is her face,

And how the cunning picture holds her still
At just that smiling instant when her soul,
Grown sweetly faint, and swept beyond control,
Consents to his inexorable will.

The Writer

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale. 6

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure. 7
A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago, 8
How we stole in, lifted a sash

6. Upper edge of a boat's rail.
7. Here, poetic image.
8. A bird trapped in a house portends a death, according to New England superstition.
Richard Wilbur

And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

Teresa

After the sun's eclipse,
The brighter angel and the spear which drew
A bridal outcry from her open lips,
She could not prove it true,
Nor think at first of any means to test
By what she had been wedded or possessed.

Not all cries were the same;
There was an island in mythology
Called by the very vowels of her name
Where vagrants of the sea,
Changed by a wand, were made to squeal and cry
As heavy captives in a witch's sty.4

The proof came soon and plain:
Visions were true which quickened her to run
God's barefoot errands in the rocks of Spain
Beneath its beating sun,
And lock the Ω of ecstasy within
The tempered consonants of discipline.2

9. St. Teresa (or Theresa, 1515–1582), Spanish mystic and saint. Among her religious visions was that of feeling her heart pierced by a divine arrow.
1. In Homer's Odyssey, the enchantress Circe turns Odysseus's companions into swine; the name of her island was Aeaea (the same vowels appear in "Teresa").
2. That is, religious discipline.
3. "He [the r
4. Rampart.
5. That is, th
6. Worn off.
7. Drain und
The Mind-Reader

For Charles and Eula

Some things are truly lost. Think of a sun-hat
Laid for the moment on a parapet.
While three young women—one, perhaps, in mourning—
Talk in the cycnetale shades. A slight wind plucks
And budges it, it scuffs to the edge and cartwheels
Into a giant view of some description:
Haggard escarpments, if you like, plunge down
Through mica shimmer to a morn of pines
Amidst which, here or there, a half-seen river
Lobs up a blink of light. The sun-hat falls,
With what free flirts and stoops you can imagine,
Down through that reeling vista or another,
Unseen by any, even by you or me.
It is as when a pipe-wrench, catapulted
From the jounce back of a pick-up truck, dives headlong
Into a bushy culvert, or a book.
Whose reader is asleep, garbling the story,
Glides from beneath a streamer chair and yields
Its hurried pages to the printless sea.

It is one thing to escape from consciousness
As such things do, another to be pent
In the dream-cache or stony obliette
Of someone's head.

They found, when I was little,
That I could tell the place of missing objects.
I stood by the bed of a girl, or the frayed knee
Of an old man whose face was lost in shadow,
When did you miss it?, people would be saying,
Where did you see it last? And then those voices,
Querying or replying, came to sound
Like cries of birds when the leaves race and whiten
And a black overcast is shelving over.
The mind is not a landscape, but if it were
There would in such case be a tilted moon
Wheeling beyond the wood through which you groped,
Its fine spokes breaking in the tangled thickets.
There would be obfuscations, paths which turned
To dried-up stream-beds, hemlocks which invited
Through shiny clearings to a groundless shade;
And yet in a sure stupor you would come
At once upon dilapidated cairns,
for gripping and turning metal pipe.
10. "Pent" = shut up, imprisoned, "dream-cache".
11. "Tile" = tile for dreams, "obliette," dungeon pit
(Frenchoublier, "to forget").
Abraded moss, and half-healed blazes\(^9\) leading
To where, around the turning of a fear,
The lost thing shone.

Imagine a railway platform—
The long cars come to a cloudy halt beside it,
And the fogged windows offering a view
Neither to those within nor those without,
Now, in the crowd—forget my predilection—
Is a young woman standing amidst her luggage,
Expecting to be met by you, a stranger.
See how she turns her head, the eyes engaging
And disengaging, pausing and dashing away.
It is like that with things put out of mind,
As the queer saying goes: a lost key hangs
Trammled by threads in what you come to see
As the webbed darkness of a sewing-basket,
Flashing a little; or a photograph,
Misplaced in an old ledger, turns its bled
Oblivious profile to rebuff your vision,
Yet glints with the fixative of thought.
What can be wiped from memory? Not the least
Meanness, obscenity, humiliation,
Terror which made you clench your eyes, or pulse
Of happiness which quickened your despair.
Nothing can be forgotten, as I am not
Permitted to forget.

It was not far
From that to this—this corner café table
Where, with my lank grey hair and vatic\(^1\) gaze,
I sit and drink at the receipt of custom.
They come here, day and night, so many people:
Sad women of the quarter, dressed in black,
As to a black confession; blinking clerks
Who half-suppose that Taurus ruminates
Upon their destinies;\(^3\) men of affairs
Down from Milan to clear it with the magus\(^4\)
Before they buy or sell some stock or other;
My fellow-drunkards; fashionable folk,
Mocking and ravenously credulous,
And skeptics bent on proving me a fraud
For fear that some small wonder, unexplained,
Should leave a fissure in the world, and all
Saint Michael's host\(^5\) come flapping back.

Paper and pencil, turn away and light
A cigarette, as you have seen me do;
They write their questions; fold them up; I lay

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9. Cuts on trees to mark a path in a forest; "cairns" (piles of stones) and rubbed-away moss would serve the same purpose.
1. That is, staring like a prophet.
2. That is, that they are influenced by astro-

5. Site of the most i which, for a fee, questi questions answered by t times.)
The Mind-Reader

My hand on theirs and go into my frenzy,
Raising my eyes to heaven, snorting smoke,
Lolling my head as in the fumes of Delphi, 5
And then, with shaken, spirit-guided fingers,
Set down the oracle. All that, of course,
Is trumpery, 6 since nine times out of ten
What words float up within another's thought
Surface as soon as mine, unfolding there
Like paper flowers in a water-glass.
In the tenth case, I sometimes cheat a little,
That shocks you? But consider: what I do
Cannot, so most conceive, be done at all,
And when I fail, I am a charlatan
Even to such as I have once astounded—
Whereas a tailor can mis-cut my coat
And be a tailor still. I tell you this
Because you know that I have the gift, the burden.
Whether or not I put my mind to it,
The world usurps me ceaselessly; my sixth
And never-resting sense is a cheap room
Black with the anger of insomnia,
Whose wall-boards vibrate with the mutters, plaints,
And flushings of the race. 7

What should I tell them?

I have no answers. Set your fears at rest,
I scribble when I must. Your paramour
Is faithful, and your spouse is unsuspecting.
You were not seen, that day, beneath the fig-tree.
Still, be more cautious. When the time is ripe,
Expect promotion. I foresee a message
From a far person who is rich and dying.
You are admired in secret. If, in your judgment,
Profit is in it, you should take the gamble.
As for these fits of weeping, they will pass.

It makes no difference that my lies are bald
And my evasions casual. It contents them
Not to have spoken, yet to have been heard.
What more do they deserve, if I could give it
Mute breathers as they are of selfish hopes
And small anxieties? Faith, justice, valor,
All those reputed rarities of soul
Confirmed in marble by our public statues—
You may be sure that 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,

5. Site of the most famous Greek oracle (at
which, for a fee, questioners could have their
questions answered by a priestess drugged by the
fumes)

6. Worthless nonsense.

7. That is, the human race. "Flushings": complaints and sudden rush of emotion.
Kingsley Amis

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.

Meanwhile, saved
By the shrewd habit of concupiscence,
Which, like a visor, narrows my regard,
And drinking studiously until my thought
Is a blind lowered almost to the sill,
I hanker for that place beyond the sparrow
Where the wrench beds in mud, the sun-hat hangs
In densest branches, and the book is drowned.

Ah, you have read my mind. One more, perhaps...
A mezzo-litro. Grazie, professoress.

8. Hamlet, just before his death, speaks: "the special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (3.4.220).
9. At the end of Shakespeare's The Tempest, the magician Prospero renounces his island and his
game, saying: "Deeper than ever did plummet sound / I'll drown my book" (5.1.56–57).

KINGSLEY AMIS

b. 1922

Kingsley Amis is poetically, as he is politically, conservative. He dislikes mawkish- ness of feeling, and finds it allied with general disorder of emotions and lives. He is also impatient of parochialism, of excess in whatever form, and plays, with considerable elegance, the role of plain man. As he announces in a poem entitled "Against Romanticism," he prefers "a temperate zone" to a "volatile wilderness." What is unkempt displeases him, as well as what is pallid. His poems are small wars of ironies, expressed with great deftness, and covert pleas for what is, as opposed to what might be. His heroes are often all dressed up with no place to go. His poems—sad, comic, and thus why—frequently catch a man at his most ridiculous: when he is in search of a fleetingly glimpsed beautiful woman. Thus his subject is the male in sexual relationships—or, rather, non-relationships. At the same time ("New Approach Needed"), he can look coolly at other kinds of relationships as well.

Amis was born in a lower-middle-class family in London on April 16, 1922. He attended the City of London School, then served in the army from 1942 to 1945. After the war he went to Oxford and took a brilliant degree in English literature. At first an academic career seemed expedient; he taught at University College, Swansea, for twelve years, long enough to gather the material for his satirical novel, Lucky Jim (1954), "the most auspicious debut of an English comic novelist since Evelyn Waugh's Decline and Fall in 1928." He then went to teach at Cambridge University, but had little stomach for it and was happy to extricate himself by writing fiction. He has published fifteen novels since Lucky Jim, the most recent being The Old Devils, which won England's Booker Prize for 1986. His later novels suggest that he has proceeded from the comedy of sex to the even more comic situation of the male's old age, dying, and death. He has continued to write poetry—some say in the matter of Movement poets; of this compartmentalization he said, "I used to be lumped into