

Richard Wilbur:
Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

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;

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 rapt 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;

the way, we will travel with soul – surely connected with the verb ‘spirited’ which precedes it in the second line. ‘Bodiless’ and ‘false:’ we will encounter these as we move through the poem.]

I should note how opposite this poem is to the greatest of the sleepers awakening poems, greatest because Bach set it to music in one of his finest cantatas: “Wachet auf,” in which the sleeping soul is commanded to wake to embrace Christ. For an English translation by my colleague Phil Ambrose, see <https://www.uvm.edu/~classics/faculty/bach/BWV140.html> In Wilbur’s more secular poem, the soul is *not* sufficient, and as for Christ ... well, we will see.

There is no body here: it is just the soul or for the not-religious, consciousness, which awakens, hanging “bodiless and simple.” Bodiless. Without a body, the awakening poet is not whole, the dawn is “false.”

And then the wondrous second sentence, offset so that it draws attention to itself: “Outside the open window/The morning air is all awash with angels.” [He is a very, very accomplished poet: notice how effortless those alliterations are, the *outside* and the *open*, the *air* and the *all* and the *awash* and the *angels*. And tying the two halves together, the *w* in *awash* and *windows*!]

The second stanza will amplify this metaphor, which is that the laundry blowing in the breeze seems to be akin to angels, disembodied but moving, empty of corporal content yet nonetheless real.

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;

[Before proceeding, let’s sit back and marvel at the alliteration and the internal rhymes:

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;]

There are times we can only sit and read and bask in wonderment. This is one of those times. Hanging from the laundry lines are sheets and blouses and smocks, all of which seem like the garments of the spiriting angels within them, “calm” and yet bespeaking “halcyon,” a time of idyllic tranquility and happiness. (The word ‘halcyon’ was the name of a mythical bird which could settle on the stormy ocean waters and calm them. Appropriate, isn’t it, for these calm billowing sheets, which float in air like birds, to represent the calm which envelops the soul as it awakes to the world!) The speaker of the poem feels joy, deep joy. At the moment of waking, looking out the window, there is laundry billowing with the wind, as if the sheets and blouses and smocks clothed non-corporeal beings. Angels. All is white, calm, joyful, moving: yet impersonal. The personal will come later.

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 rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

They are moving (in the wind) but not moving (clipped to the clothesline): “flying in place.” They are, for the moment, all there is (“omnipresence”) yet moving in “terrible” fashion. Terrible? Ah, but the ways of the Lord, the ways of spirit, are indeed capable of inducing terror in us, awe at the magnitude of the spirit’s expanse. Thus, the laundry moving is moving at a terrible speed. So at this one moment the bed-sheets are like the rapids in a river, ever-moving yet ever in the same place. In one place, while nonetheless the movement of the water, the movement of the wind-blown swelling of the laundry, is emphasized. The next moment, when the breeze stills, they “swoon down into so rapt a quiet” that what had just been “terrible speed” now seems motionless, without sound. Of course, “nobody seems to be there.” The habiliment of angels, the sheets and blouses, suddenly calms and the hanging clothes seem to be what they are, laundry hanging from a line, and no longer the garb of angels.

The soul shrinks

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

Poems have “turns,” where what the reader and poet began with becomes something else. The laundry, stilled as the breeze has died, is to the observer an augury of what is to come, a world without angels but nonetheless terrifyingly real. The soul, responding to and admiring the pure world of angels, is about to be ‘raped’ by what it remembers, that we live in a world of things and people and colors, not a world of angels. “Rape” is a harsh word, one that resounds to some more harshly today I think than when Wilbur wrote the poem. The purity of the angelic, the world the soul admires and responds to, is about to be violated in the most awful sense.

(Let me confess that I, probably like many of you reading this, am appalled by Wilbur’s use of that noun, “rape.” It seems so harsh, so violative, so vulgarly male. And yet he is using the term to refer to the harshness, the extreme transgression, of what happens to us every morning, when having turned from sleep we pass through a floating – like the laundry? – mindlessness, and then wake into the world of things and people and obligations and moral judgments. “Rape” rankles profoundly, yet despite my reservations it is effective.)

Why do we make such a turn, from purity to purity violated, from angelic love to – what? Let me bring forward the title here, “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.” I’m reminded of Robert Frost, in his old chestnut of a poem (wonderful nonetheless), “Birches.” The boy of that poem, the boy of his memory, climbs young birches only to launch out and have their slender trunks carry him back to the ground.

May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.

“Earth’s the right place for love.” That is why the angelic world must retreat, raped by the memory of what has happened yesterday and the day before. Love is a thing of this, our world, with bodies and not just laundry, with colors and heaviness and difficulty. Love is in our daily world, not in the spiritual realm. There are a lot of intelligent and careful readers who see this poem as balancing the spiritual world against the physical world; the last line will support them. But to me, this passage is critical to the poem: all we know is what we have experienced and remember, and that is the physical world. The “blessed” is always assaulted by the physical world in which we live. “Earth’s the right place for love,” Frost proclaimed; the title of this poem proclaims the same thing. (Here is what Richard Wilbur said: “Plato, St. Teresa, 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 it is love that brings us back.”” Yes, love, which we encounter according to the poem only on earth. Any sense of direct spiritual connection is, like the dawn of that first stanza, “false.”

The rest of the poem tells us what we have just recognized. The soul wants to remain in the pure, the angelic, the wondrous. But just as the sheets and clothes on the line were empty – billowed by wind, which is a physical trope for spirit – so the world we inhabit is empty without weight and color and the difficulties of the everyday.

The soul, of course, wishes it were otherwise. For those of you who, like me, are not comfortable with ‘soul,’ think of our inner longing, our deepest desire, for calm and peace and purity: Our soul or our longing does not want this world of what he will shortly call ‘hunks.” Our soul and longings are for purity and easeful comfort. The soul

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.”

Yes, dances; yes rising. But those rosy hands are real hands, reddened by hot water. Though we strive to turn them into Homer’s ‘rosy-fingered dawn,’ the hands, like what will follow, draw us back into the world from which that laundry first originated before it was hung on the lines in early morning: the human world, where hands redden as they encounter hot water and the harshness of laundry soap.

We long to remain in the comfort that we encounter as we *rise* out of sleep, though as the next lines indicate we will soon ‘descend’ into the world that is all around us. There is surely a paradox here, as the soul “descends” into a world of “hunks” and “colors” – so unlike the billowing, empty laundry of the first part of the poem, the world of soul and spirit.

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,

in sexual intercourse, of nuns walking. What a series of human beings, a congeries which ranges from criminality to sex to spiritual dedication!

This is probably the moment to recognize that this last section of the poem, in which the soul speaks, is a series of imperatives. First, the command to bring the punished down from the gallows; then a series in which the soul not only accepts but *commands* the world to be as it is: “Let.”

What should we ‘let?’ Let thieves be clad in the laundry that has been washed, in “clean linen.” Let lovers go forth with the freshness and sweetness that was earlier ascribed to the angelic realm, but here with the irony that what lovers do when they are “undone” is get naked and make love. The laundry is removed, and sweet (yet “bitter” because bodily and hence not everlasting) love ensues.

We are not done, or at least Richard Wilbur is not done. The poem ends with an image of nuns, certainly the emblem of purity and soul in humans, walking heavily – “hunks,” not the slight breeziness of blowing sheets – through the world. Yes, they walk as the “heaviest” but they also are, like the laundry which started the poem, walking “in a pure floating.” Opposites abounding, their smocks are “dark,” as are their daily customs. They have “dark habits,” that noun referring both to their daily outfits, for the dress of nuns is called their ‘habit,’ and to the repetition of prayer and faithfulness, dark since those praying move through a world of “colors” and not of the white purity of laundry.

Thus we come to the offset final phrase of the poem, the phrase with which I began: a mediation of the opposition which the poem counterpoises for us, wind-blown laundry and the “heavy” bodily existences it will enclose. This is the balance nuns must achieve, between their spiritual calling and their need to minister to the sufferings they encounter in the world.

And yet. And yet. I find in the final line the perfect, and I mean perfect, expression of what it means to be human. To find a way to balance all that pulls at us, often from contrary directions. Yes, spirituality and the body. But also morality and the demands of a secular world. (Think of those thieves, who stray from the moral code and yet need to live in the world just as the rest of us do.) And the strange – “difficult,” “terrible” – understanding, highlighted in the poem by the line “Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone” – that it is with and through the body that we find love. An aging William Butler Yeats understood this, and gave to a crazy woman he called Jane these disquieting, strange, wondrous lines about sex:

But love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
And nothing can be soul or whole
That has not been rent.

Love is found in *this* world, it calls us to *this* world, and *this* world is a world of bodies and all their imperfections, strange desires, and awe-ful consummations.

Most importantly, at least for me, the final phrase describes what it means to live out our lives in a wakened world, no longer asleep and in that slumbering dimension where wish and the intractable world are not in conflict. Each day we awaken to our ‘responsibilities’ and seek to find our way, our “difficult balance,” between what we want or desire and what we have to do to live with others in a world of objects, that world of which Miranda said in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,

Oh, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in ’t!

Freud called this the opposition, between what we desire and the cares and demands of every day, a struggle between libido (or id) and superego; he said, famously, of this struggle, “Where id was, let ego be.” The difficult balance is between what we desire and what we do and find ourselves needing to do, each and every day. It is in this balance that we find love in *our* world.

Let’s return to the title. “Love calls us to the things of this world.” Each day we awaken to what is before us: not sleep, not the disembodied world of lying comfortably in bed as sheets blow on the laundry line, but rising into life. Getting out of bed, getting dressed (putting on that laundry, clothing our bodies), eating breakfast. And, more, living with other people and their difficulties, trying to act justly in a world which so often seems ruled by injustice, finding our path forward when so many contraries assault our sense of what to do. “Finding [our] difficult balance.”