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Richard Wilbur's Book of Nature

by William Tate

Introduction

There's a general appropriateness in associating Richard Wilbur's poetry with the Romantic tradition, in both British and American Transcendentalist forms. As early as 1968, in an article I still find compelling, George Monteiro suggests that Wilbur's attitude towards the natural world is "even closer in spirit to the transcendental attitudes expressed by [Thoreau's] *Walden* and [Emerson's essay] *Nature*" than it is to the attitudes of Robinson Jeffers or even Robert Frost.[1] In his conclusion, Monteiro also notes Wilbur's appreciation of Blake (809). Something very like Monteiro's association of Wilbur with Romanticism appears more recently in "An Analysis of Wilbur's Mayflies," which I encountered on bartleby.com while writing this paper. The author of that piece opens by saying that "Richard Wilbur's recent poem 'Mayflies' reminds us that the American Romantic tradition that Robert Frost most famously brought into the 20th century has made it safely into the 21st."[2]

Broadly speaking, I agree with these critics in recognizing Romanticism as an important heritage for Wilbur's poetry, and I think Wilbur would happily acknowledge the association. Nevertheless, Wilbur himself suggests at least one important difference between his own attitude and the attitudes informing Romanticism. I want to assess this difference as he expresses it in two texts, so my presentation here will develop in two movements. In the first movement, I'll read Wilbur's "Mayflies" as a sort of friendly amendment to one of William Wordsworth's best-known poems, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." In the second movement, I'll draw on a passing observation in Wilbur's essay "Regarding Places" in order to characterize Wilbur's own sense of what separates his attitudes from those conventionally identified as Romantic or Transcendentalist. Following on these two movements, I'll consider in a third section why the distinction matters for understanding the poems. Finally, by way of conclusion, I'll suggest several more general implications of these readings with regard to the ways Christian readers think about human knowing.

First Movement: Wilbur and Wordsworth

A number of shared themes and concepts suggest the usefulness of reading Wilbur's "Mayflies" alongside Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," also known as "Daffodils." I'll focus on two of these shared notions, the poems' similar treatments of the human place within a cosmic[3] whole, and their characterizations of this whole with ref-

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Dr. William Tate is Professor of English at Covenant College.

erence to the traditional image of a great cosmic dance.[4] To avoid creating any misleading expectations, let me point out that my reading will be intertextual; that is, I am not treating Wordsworth's poem as a source for Wilbur's. Instead, I mean to bring the two poems into a kind of conceptual conversation with each other.[5]

The speaker of Wordsworth's poem opens by declaring his loneliness: "I wandered lonely as a cloud."[6] We might quibble and ask "how lonely is a cloud, actually?"[7] Nevertheless, "lonely" connotes a lack, and the lines following confirm that the image is meant to indicate the speaker's sense of separation from his environment: according to the second line, the imagined cloud "floats on high," spatially distant from the earthy solidity of "vales and hills" as well as figuratively distant from the clearly implied desideratum of solidarity with other things. Beginning with the third line, the speaker's sense of loneliness is countered by his perception of several collectivities which eventually emerge—or merge—in a universal continuity: centrally, and suddenly, the speaker encounters "a crowd, / A host, of golden daffodils" (3-4). Though distinguishable from other kinds in their grouping as a particular species, the daffodils are also closely associated with their surroundings, *related* to (as part of) the larger grouping of the landscape. They are "*beside* the lake" and "*beneath* the trees" (5). The second stanza expands this grouping so that the daffodils mirror or echo the clustering "stars that shine / And twinkle in the milky way" (7-8). Line seven calls the grouping of the stars "continuous," and line nine underscores their similarity with the "never-ending line" of daffodils; we are invited to recognize that the continuities which the speaker perceives in nature manifest an ordered whole.

Wordsworth enables the speaker's assimilation into this universal solidarity by means of the traditional notion of a cosmic dance. At the end of the first stanza, the daffodils are "Fluttering and dancing in the breeze" (6).[8] At the end of the second stanza the speaker says he saw "Ten thousand…at a glance, / Tossing their heads in sprightly dance" (11-12). These two descriptions frame the poem's reference to the milky way, assimilating the stars also into the dance of the flowers, and the third stanza adds the waves of the lake, which "danced" beside the daffodils. The third stanza closes by implying that the speaker is drawn from his solitude into this universal dance: "A poet could not but be gay, / In such a jocund company" (15-16). The preposition "in" transforms the speaker into a participant, a member of the company and thus also a dancer rather than simply a solitary wanderer.[9] The final stanza extends the dance temporally; it persists in the memory of the speaker when he recalls the daffodils so that later, and at any time, his "heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils" (23-4).

I said just now that "the speaker is drawn from his solitude into this universal dance," and it was necessary to state this passively because the poem is silent with regard to the agent or cause of the speaker's participation. My best guess at the moment is that the speaker's exercise of his own will is central to his entrance into participation. This guess is informed by a passage near the beginning of *The Prelude* where the poet, echoing the closing lines of *Paradise Lost*, says,

> The earth is all before me: with a heart
> Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
> I look about, and should the guide I choose[10]
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way.[11]

These lines emphasize the free choice and confident expectation of the speaker as he takes responsibility for his own life, and the choice of the wandering cloud here declares a continuity between the emphasis of *The Prelude* and the achieved joy of the lyric. Although the evidence of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" is limited, it seems at least plausible to me that the relationship between speaker and natural world is accomplished by (or expresses participation in) the indeterminate but apparently universal spirit which, in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," "rolls through all things" allowing the poet's "eye, and ear" both to "perceive" and "half create" the things of this world (see lines 93-111). As Charles Taylor observes more generally, the Romantics "identified the source of 'grace' as nature within."[12] What matters for my immediate purposes is precisely the indeterminacy of this influence. Again, according to Taylor, "the goodness of nature and/or our unreserved immersion in it, seemed to require its independence, *and*

a negation of any divine vocation."[13] If this comment applies to Wordsworth's poem (and I think it does), the particular implication would be that, although the speaker is called into the dance, the calling (vocation) is impersonal (rather than divine); only the speaker and the other (materially manifest) dancers participate in the cosmic performance.

Wilbur's "Mayflies"[14] resembles Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," both because it also foregrounds the speaker's sense of separateness from the natural world and because it recognizes in the unity among things a cosmic dance. Wordsworth's speaker mentions his loneliness in the first line; Wilbur's speaker describes the dance first, reserving his declaration of loneliness for the final stanza. More emphatically than Wordsworth's speaker, Wilbur's recognizes his loneliness as in direct contrast with the participatory unity of everything else he perceives. "Watching those lifelong dancers,"[15] that is, the mayflies of the title, he says, "I felt myself alone / In a life too much my own;" furthermore, he perceives himself as "*More* mortal in [his] separateness than they" (17-20)—that is, more existentially mortal because of his perceived estrangement from the unity in which they participate.

In contrast with Wordsworth, then, Wilbur overtly identifies the agent of human participation with and in the created world as the biblial God who calls.[23]

Wilbur's account of the cosmic dance begins with the speaker's seeing "a mist of flies" that "rise / And animate a ragged patch of glow" (2-4). He then compares these mayflies to "a crowd / Of stars" that appear suddenly "Through a brief gap in black and driven cloud" (5-7).[16] We should probably notice the resonance between mist and clouds as well as the more directly observed correspondence between mayflies and stars. And we may notice in passing that Wilbur, like Wordsworth, but perhaps inevitably, rhymes "cloud" with "crowd."[17] The gap in the clouds reveals "One arc of [the] great round-dance" of the stars (8). After this reference to the "round-dance" of the stars, we may return to the number Wilbur uses to quantify the mayflies. Like Wordsworth's "ten-thousand," Wilbur's "quadrillions" sets aside precision to emphasize that the crowd is innumerable. But Wilbur's choice of number also suggests a pun of the sort that Wilbur loves; I'm nearly positive that he means for us to remember that a "quadrille" is a kind of round-dance.[18] Before considering further this possible significance of "quadrillions," we should notice that Wilbur's second stanza assimilates the mayflies into the dance of the stars; we read that "In entrechats[19] each fluttering insect there / Rose two steep yards in air" (10-11). Wilbur's "fluttering insects" recall Wordsworth's "fluttering" daffodils as participants in the universal dance.

Though awareness of the cosmic dance evokes the speaker's deep sense of his own "separateness," Wilbur's speaker, like Wordsworth's, discovers a participatory role relative to the dance. He says, "I felt myself alone" (18), but then reconsiders in the final lines of the poem: "Unless, [he thinks], I had been called to be / Not fly or star / But one whose task is joyfully[20] to see / How fair the fiats of the caller are" (21-4).[21] Here is the crucial difference from Wordsworth. Wordsworth's poem involves two terms, so to speak: the initially isolated speaker and the welcoming crowd of other dancers. Wilbur's poem also involves an initially isolated speaker and a comprehensive crowd of dancers, but Wilbur adds a third term, "the caller," and identifies the caller in two ways. First, more abstractly, the caller is the one who guides the dance. Round-dances generally, and quadrilles in particular, like American square dances, are *called* dances. That is, the movements of the dancers are governed by a person who *calls out* instructions. More concretely, Wilbur identifies the caller of the cosmic dance as the divine Creator of Genesis 1, the God whose "let-there-be" speech acts ("fiat" recalls the Latin for these[22]) accomplished all that is "fair," saw all that he had made and called it good. In contrast with Wordsworth, then, Wilbur overtly identifies the agent of human participation with and in the created world as the biblical God who calls.[23]

Second Movement: "Regarding Places"

The difference between the two-term picture of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and the three-term picture offered by "Mayflies" seems significant, but significant of what? The most provocative hint I've found appears in Wilbur's 1972 essay "Regarding Places," where Wilbur comments directly—though only in passing—on the Romantic and Transcendentalist strands of the tradition that has shaped him. Wilbur identifies "[William Cullen] Bryant's homiletic woods,"[24] along with "Emerson's and Whitman's symbolic streams or grasses," as "latter versions and warpings of the old notion that nature is a book of revelation." Admitting that "the book [of nature] has grown difficult to read," he concludes that the decline of this notion "is unfortunate for the imagination, which when in best health neither slights the world of fact nor stops with it, but seeks the invisible through the visible."[25] Wilbur here, without much explanation, simply takes it as obvious that there is something incomplete in the way these Romantic predecessors depict and evaluate the natural world, and that their omission of this something has consequences.

By characterizing the nature poems of Bryant, Emerson, and Whitman as "warpings of the old notion that nature is a book of revelation," Wilbur tacitly endorses a tradition with ancient roots.[26] The "old notion" occurs at least as early as Augustine, but here's a developed version from the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor:

> For this whole visible world is a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power; and individual creatures are as figures therein not devised by human will but instituted by divine authority to show forth the wisdom of the invisible things of God. But just as some illiterate man who sees an open book looks at the figures but does not recognize the letters: just so the foolish natural man who does not perceive the things of God sees outwardly in these visible creatures the appearances but does not inwardly understand the reason. But he who is spiritual and can judge all things, while he considers outwardly the beauty of the work inwardly conceives how marvelous is the wisdom of the Creator.[27]

We should notice two ideas in particular. First, Hugh regards the visible world as created by God. Second, because the natural world is God's creation, Hugh expects a spiritual person to discern in and through the visible creation a revelation of invisible things.

The importance of the Bible for guiding our understanding of the book of nature is also traditional. Jean-Louis Chrétien quotes the following passage from St. Bonaventure:

> In the state of innocence…man had a knowledge of created things and he was impelled by their representations to praise God, to honour and love him. Creatures are ordered to that and are led back…to God in this way. But when man had fallen and lost his knowledge, there was no one to lead man and his knowledge back to God…. The book [of nature], in other words the world, was then as it were dead and effaced, which is why another book was necessary by which man was illuminated in order to interpret the metaphors of things…. This book is the book of the Scripture which brings out the resemblances, the properties and metaphors of things written in the book of the world,[28] and reorders the whole world to the knowledge, praise and love of God.[29]

Chrétien introduces this quotation in part to explain an assessment of Whitman similar to Wilbur's: St Francis of Assisi "was certainly not a distant precursor of Walt Whitman: listening to the polyphony of the world is in no way an unmediated exaltation verging on pantheism, but here springs from faith in the one sole Mediator. For Christianity, no one comes to the Father but through the Son," and, similarly, no one understands the creation who does not recognize the Creator.[30] Concerning the consequence of Romantic pantheism, Chrétien is more explicit than Wilbur: "Any *immediate* relating of nature to its author, in a mirroring in which there would in truth be nothing to *hear*, would merely lead, after a few cries of jubilation, to a silence of disenchantment and death, a *vanity*…. It is not enough to sing the world, this song must have a meaning, it must say something, it must make sense."[31]

A very similar identification of nature as a book of revelation persisted in Reformation thought. According to Article 2 of *The Belgic Confession*,

> We know [God] by two means: first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate *the invisible things of God*, namely, *his eternal power and Godhead*, as the Apostle Paul saith (Rom. 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse.
>
> Secondly, he makes himself more clearly and more fully known to us by his holy and divine Word: that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.[32]

As the confession specifies, the Apostle Paul saith what he saith in Romans 1:20. In the English Standard Version, this verse declares that God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." When Wilbur explains what he calls Emerson's "warpings," he indicates that the healthy imagination "seeks the invisible through the visible." Like Hugh and like the *Belgic Confession*, Wilbur has Romans 1:20 in mind. (There's a hint in this direction already in line 2 of "Mayflies," where the speaker posits an invisible source for the visible flies: he says "I saw" the flies "rise" "from *unseen* pools.") One part, at least, of what the Apostle Paul and Hugh and the *Belgic Confession* and Wilbur have in common is the conviction that the human being who is rightly oriented[33] to the natural world will apprehend it as the visible work of an invisible divine creator who is made manifest in that work.

The "warping" Wilbur observes in Bryant and Emerson and Whitman involves, further, their obscuration of God's relation to the natural world as creator.[34] According to Romans 1:18, "unrighteous" people "suppress the truth," apparently employing reason *against* revelation. In other words, the passage indicates that some human beings are *not* rightly oriented to (that which is revealed in and through) the natural world. Jean-Luc Marion explains, "The question [in the passage] does not bear on the knowledge of God: Paul holds *that* to be established and obvious; the question does not bear on the recognition of what men know already, but instead on their refusal to glorify and give thanks for what they know."[35] When Hugh chastises the foolish man who "does not perceive the things of God…in these visible creatures," he also echoes the Apostle Paul. Wilbur is gentler, but his word "warping" signals a similar awareness.

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Why Wilbur's Difference from Wordsworth Matters

Wilbur's identification of nature as a book of revelation brings into focus the key difference between his account of the human place in the cosmic dance in "Mayflies" and Wordsworth's account in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Wordsworth's two-term system at best conceals the agency of God in the natural world, while Wilbur's three-term understanding declares it. Why does the difference matter? Let me suggest two implications, drawing on the work of two modern theologians.

I have already mentioned Colin Gunton in a note. Gunton's 1992 Bampton Lectures, published as *The One, The Three and The Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, address the significance of what I have called Wilbur's three-term understanding, and Gunton grounds this significance in the teaching of Romans 1:20. He says,

> It would seem reasonable to suppose that all being, meaning and truth is, even as created and distinct from God, in some way marked by its relatedness to its creator…. [W]e should gladly affirm Paul's confession that "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1.20).[36]

As his primary title implies, Gunton disqualifies the traditional question of "the One and the many"—the form of human relation to things presupposed by Wordsworth's (two-term) "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"—as insufficient.

Gunton proposes a trinitarian account of creation as a more adequate explanation of the unity of things, in part because such an account preserves the importance of particular created things while also establishing their relatedness to one another. Summarizing some of his key points, Gunton says,

> The teaching that the creation is what it is by virtue of the real relation of God to it both in its absolute beginning out of nothing and in its being continually upheld and directed to perfection is not the offence that it has been taken to be. Because the world has its "inscape" provided by the Son, the one who became part of the world for the sake of the world, and [because] the Spirit, whose characteristic form of action is to enable the world to become itself, a trinitarian theology of creation offers that which neither antiquity—for the most part—nor modernity adequately achieved. (229)[37]

The implications suggested by this passage are too rich and complex to develop here; among them, however, is a conclusion very similar to Wilbur's. Regarding the "human response to God and the world," Gunton says, "If the true end of all human action is praise of the creator,[38] of rendering to him due response for his goodness, we have here a common light to illuminate all the dimensions of human culture." All human action should be "a sacrifice of praise." The implication for the natural world is this: "To say that all action should take the form of the sacrifice of praise is to say that action toward the world is action directed to allowing that world truly to be itself before God" (227). Something like this letting the world be itself, along with offering "the sacrifice of praise," approaches what Wilbur has in mind when his speaker recognizes that his calling is "joyfully to see / How fair the fiats of the caller are."[39]

Proper praise for the Creator does not eclipse minute particular created things: short-lived mayflies, for example, matter *because* they are created. As Gunton explains,

> [T]rinitarian love has as much to do with respecting and constituting otherness as with unifying…. [I]t is the Son who is the unifier of creation, the one in whom all things hold together. By contrast, but not in contradiction, we can understand the Spirit's distinctive mode of action as the one who maintains the particularity, distinctiveness, uniqueness, through the Son, of each within the unity. (206)

At best, Wordsworth leaves inexplicit what Gunton and Wilbur recognize as necessary to adequate knowing: recognition of the Creator in the creation. Omission of the sacrifice of praise explains at least part of what Wilbur considers "warpings" in Emerson and Whitman. But the omission of the sacrifice of praise may also produce a neglect of the precious particularity of individual created things.

Norman Wirzba, in *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World*,[40] suggests further elaborations of this insight. Failure to recognize God as Creator is not only important in a Godward direction but also shapes the human response to the created world. Wirzba's central argument is that it matters a great deal whether we construe the world as "nature" or as "creation." As he explains,

> Seeing creation is no small or easy thing, because much more is at stake than a few ideas about how we think the world began. Viewed biblically, the term "creation" designates a moral and spiritual topography that situates all things in relationship with each other and with God. That means the teaching of creation is about the "character" of the world and the health of the relationships that are operative within it. (73)

Like Gunton, Wirzba emphasizes the trinitarian character of creation: "As such, creation was a Triune act and could not be understood apart from the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit to lead creation toward its fulfillment and perfection." Recognition of the world's createdness, therefore, "had the practical effect of calling people to *participate* in God's redemptive work" (73), which, as Wirzba explains, includes caring for the world by seeking its flourishing. Recognition of the world as "creation" (rather than simply as "nature") involves human beings in

"a hermeneutic that constitutes us as bearing witness" (71), since "creation" exceeds our comprehension (whereas "nature" presupposes our capacity to comprehend the world objectively).[41]

To put this another way, recognizing the world as creation allows for wonder, but construing the world as nature tends towards exploitation. In "Lying," a poem published more than a decade before "Mayflies," Wilbur describes our human task as "bearing witness / To what each morning brings again to light" (17-18). The joyful seeing of "Mayflies" (23) occurs as witnessing (9) and answers creation's call to experience wonder.

All this entails that *all knowing matters to God.*

Implications

The two texts by Wilbur that I've considered hint at a number of implications that he leaves undeveloped, particularly with regard to the notion of revelation. Let me conclude by teasing out what I take to be at least some of these implications. In *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, Gunton develops a claim made by Wordsworth's sometime ally Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "'all Truth,' said Coleridge, 'is a species of Revelation.'"[42] There's something in this claim akin to the Reformed recognition of both general and special revelation. Herman Bavinck, for example, says that "the entire universe is a revelation of God. There is no part of the universe in which something of his perfection does not shine forth."[43] In other words, it's *all* revelation. We human beings only know—and know only in creaturely, finite ways—what God has revealed. It's impossible for us to know anything that is not revelation. God reveals himself through his *words* (special revelation) and through his *deeds* (general revelation). These categories, more frequently used in the Reformed tradition than outside it, correspond (partly) to God's self-revelation in the book of Scripture and the book of nature. Broadly speaking we might say that special revelation aims at our spiritual needs/interests/knowing while general revelation aims at our material and physical needs/interests/knowing—always remembering that spiritual and material are for us (temporal, bodily) creatures as inter-involved as warp and woof in a complex tapestry.

God has revealed himself in both general and special revelation, but we sometimes forget that he also reveals *us* and *everything else* in both general and special revelation. By implication, as well as by direct biblical command, it is God's will for us to understand *him* by studying the two books and the two kinds of revelation. But in addition, it is God's will for us to understand *ourselves* and *other human beings* and *the rest of creation* by studying the two books and the two kinds.[44] God's revelation in the two books (and in two kinds) is ultimately of a piece: what God reveals is consistent (coherent, cohesive) across both kinds of revelation. Because it is more direct and clearer, God's word in Scripture is normative—it takes precedence with regard to any apparent discrepancy between the findings of biblical study and the findings of science or cultural studies (for example). Nevertheless, God's word in nature and providence is also authoritative, and it is appropriate for us to proceed cautiously with regard to any apparent discrepancy. It may be the case that the appearance of discrepancy arises from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the findings of science and that further study will yield a reconciliation of those findings with the teachings of Scripture. On the other hand, it may be the case that the appearance of discrepancy arises from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of Scripture, so that in God's good providence the findings of science or the poetic renderings of "the imagination…in best health" (as Wilbur puts it) call believers to reconsider their interpretation in order to understand better what Scripture says. The contingency in all this should not surprise or frighten us; God made us for time, and our understanding—our gaining of knowledge and wisdom—proceeds in time rather than coming on us all at once. One way we walk by faith is by trusting in God's providential guidance into the knowing we need (which will never be absolute knowing).

All this entails that *all knowing matters to God*. (This entailment is, I think, the fundamental justification for Christian liberal arts education.) For human beings to come to understand God, themselves, each other, and the rest of creation is pleasing to God. All else being equal, the knowledge of

a believer with regard to any particular datum or concept ought to be richer and more robust than conventional Western practices of knowing allow because her knowledge will include acknowledgement of God as the one in whom all things consist. It is possible for anyone to have a partially[45] correct knowledge of things apart from God, but fullness of knowing includes doxology. As Wilbur's works affirm, this doxological knowing includes delighted recognition of the thing known as a piece of God's handiwork, revealed by God's grace. Consciousness of this fullness ought to shape how we think about the project of learning.

Endnotes

1. Monteiro, "Redemption Through Nature: A Recurring Theme in Thoreau, Frost and Richard Wilbur," *American Quarterly* 20.4 (Winter 1968): 795-809. I quote from 805.
2. Bartleby.com, accessed 1/16/2020 at https://www.bartleby.com/essay/An-Analysis-of-Wilburs-Mayflies-P3ELPUYTJ.
3. "Cosmos" connotes order; Wilbur's negation of "muddled" (9) and his use of "composed" (13) presuppose order as a feature of his explanation.
4. Both poems are rich in interesting detail, and I will comment on some of this detail in footnotes. For the dance image, see Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "Orchestra and the Golden Flower: A Critical Interpretation of the Two Versions of Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,'" *The Yearbook of English Studies* 4 (1974): 149-58. William Blake's "Sons of Los" also uses the motif:

   > Thou seest the gorgeous clothed Flies that dance & sport in summer
   >
   > Upon the sunny brooks & meadows; every one the dance
   >
   > Knows in its intricate mazes of delight artful to weave:
   >
   > Each one to sound his instruments of music in the dance,
   >
   > To touch each other & recede; to cross & change & return.

   Blake's *Milton* (plate 26) is cited by M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 435.
5. My reading is of the later (1815) version of Wordsworth's poem.
6. Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., vol. D, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). The poem is frequently anthologized and easy to find online.
7. Marjorie Levinson considers several interesting variations on this question in "Of Being Numerous," *Studies in Romanticism* 49.4 (Winter 2010): 633-57. Levinson sets out "to model singularity as a way of being numerous" (634). Her argument is too subtle and sprawling for me to summarize it here, but she concludes by suggesting that the move towards "nature" in Romanticism involves "the human re-conceived by its participation in the whole of nature" (656).
8. The breeze, by the way, may well suggest a universally active spirit; it may well be the same as "the correspondent breeze" of the opening section of *The Prelude*.
9. The evidence of the poem is limited, but it seems to me that the speaker's participation and withdrawal coexist dynamically.
10. I quote the passage from Abrams (see next note); the version in *The Norton Anthology* has here "should the chosen guide."
11. I, 15-19, cited by M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism*, 115.
12. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 430. In his next paragraph Taylor notes that Coleridge, "deeply influenced by…German thought, defined 'Redemption' as a 'Reconciliation from… Enmity with Nature'" (430; he cites M. H. Abrams' *Correspondent Breeze*).
13. Sources, 315, emphasis added.
14. I quote Wilbur's poetry from *Collected Poems 1943-2004* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004).
15. The emphasis in this poem on the brevity of insect life reprises a motif from Wilbur's "Water Walker."
16. Though "gap" indicates a breach, here it is an opening that is part of the pattern of the dance, rather than an estrangement.
17. Incidentally, both poems are 24 lines long.

18. Wilbur frequently alludes to Lewis Carroll's Alice books; a pun on quadrille may have been suggested to Wilbur by the Mock Turtle's song in *Through the Looking-Glass*, which mentions "The Lobster Quadrille."

19. An entrechat is a vertical leap in ballet.

20. As Jean-Louis Chrétien observes, "all true labour of thought is an act of gratitude," *Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 116. A couple of pages later, Chrétien associates this "labour" with "the *gaudium de veritate*, joy at the truth, by which St. Augustine had defined blessedness" (118).

21. In an explication of aspects of Heidegger's thought, Mark Wrathall nicely summarizes the traditional understanding: "when God [was acknowledged as] the Judeo-Christian creator God of the theologians, we were attuned to things as instantiations of the ideal forms created by God. We, in turn, *were called by all of creation to a certain reverence for the handiwork of God*, and we were provoked to the intellectual project of coming to understand the mind of God as manifest in the world. In other words, God's attunement required of us particular modes of comportment. Because things could show up as making demands on us, things mattered." *Heidegger and Unconcealment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 199.

22. As in *fiat lux*, "let there be light" (Genesis 1:3).

23. To be clear, I am not denying either Wordsworth's appreciation of the Bible or his sympathies for features of traditional Christianity; rather, I am drawing attention to habits of expression that mute Christian distinctives, tendencies he shares with other Romantics.

24. Abrams comments briefly on Wordsworth's influence on Bryant in *Natural Supernaturalism*, 137. On the same page, assessing Wordsworth's influence on William Hale White, Abrams quotes White: "in Wordsworth, White said, 'God is nowhere formally deposed'; yet the deity in a personal form has faded away, leaving his attributes to be assimilated by nature." Wilbur recycles the phrase "Mr. Bryant's // Homiletic woods" in "A Wall in the Woods: Cummington" (lines 24-25 of the poem's second section).

25. Wilbur, *Responses*, 158-9. "Regarding Places" was first written as an introduction for *A Sense of Place*, "a collection of paintings and texts by American landscape artists" (*Responses*, 152).

26. For a succinct survey of the tradition, with particular reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer, see David Vessey, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and the *Liber Naturae*," *Philosophy Today* 58.1 (Winter 2014), 85-95.

27. I quote the passage from Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 29. Josipovici quotes from C. S. Singleton, *Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 25. My colleague Cameron Clausing kindly tracked down the Latin passage for me in Hugh's *De tribus diebus* 4: PL 176.814BC.

28. The centrality of metaphor in Bonaventure's description anticipates an important passage in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Bavinck says,

    > Hence, all our talk of invisible things is metaphorical, figurative, poetic.... But this does not mean that what we say is untrue and incorrect. On the contrary, real poetry is truth, for it is based on the resemblance, similarity, and kinship that exist between different groups of phenomena. All language, all metaphors and similes, all symbolism are based on and presuppose this penetration of the visible by the invisible world. If speaking figuratively were untrue, all our thought and knowledge would be an illusion and speech itself impossible. (2.106)

    I consider this passage in "Something in Us Like the Catbird's Song," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13:3 (Summer 2010): 105-123.

29. *The Ark of Speech*, 141. Bonaventure's description of the relationship between the book of nature and the book of scripture anticipates, and may have shaped, John Calvin's:

    > Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise

> confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960; I.vi.1)

Calvin repeats the description of the Scriptures as spectacles in Institutes I.xiv.1 and in the "Argument" of his *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 62.

30. Wilbur's similar assessment of St. Francis seems evident in "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" and (less explicitly) in "Bone Key."
31. *The Ark of Speech*, 140.
32. *Belgic Confession*, Article II, in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century,* ed. Arthur Cochrane (London: SCM Press, 1966).
33. This qualifying phrase is important because there is a gap between that which is revealed here (which, following Herman Bavinck, G. C. Berkouwer, Colin Gunton, and others I call "general revelation") and the deliverances of reason. As Gunton observes, "there is a case for holding…that the relation between this revelation and the faculty of reason is not as obvious as is sometimes supposed" (*Brief Theology of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995, 40). My sense of what it means to be "rightly oriented" owes something to Alvin Plantinga's account of "proper function" (especially in *Warranted Christian Belief*). Although "general revelation" and "natural theology" are sometimes conflated, I agree with many in the Reformed tradition that they differ from each other in important ways. I agree with Gunton, in particular, that "we must draw a distinction between a theology of nature and a natural theology" (41).
34. According to Abrams, "Wordsworth's 'speaking face of earth and heaven' is a lineal descendant of the ancient Christian concept of the *liber naturae*, whose symbols bespeak the attributes and intentions of its author" (*Natural Supernaturalism* 88; see also 88-94, 104, 399ff.). Wilbur's assertion of "warping" doesn't contradict Abrams' description but qualifies it.
35. *Givenness and Revelation*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 28-9.
36. Gunton, *The One, The Three and The Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 167. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
37. Gunton borrows the term "inscape" from Gerard Manley Hopkins; see 55 and 196-199. "Inscape" is the unique particularizing characteristic of a thing, its distinctive inner landscape (beautifully itemized, for example, in Hopkins' "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"); inscape resembles the scholastic notion of *haecceitas*.
38. Compare the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."
39. Wilbur expresses similar ideas in other poems. See the early "Praise in Summer" (which, however, is inexplicit with regard to the agency of the call to praise) and "Lying." The penultimate line of "Lying" acknowledges "the dove that hatched the dovetailed world" (the Holy Spirit as described in Genesis 1:1-2) as grounding human creativity. The acknowledgement illuminates his description of "the imagination…in best health" in "Regarding Places."
40. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
41. Wirzba is here drawing on ideas from Jean-Luc Marion. For an account of Marion's "constituted witness," see my "Converting the Gaze" [under review].
42. Gunton, *Brief Theology*, 22.
43. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.135.
44. The point is suggested already in Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2; as Calvin explains, God brings the animals to Adam "in order that he, *having closely inspected them, might distinguish them by appropriate names, agreeing with the nature of each*" (*Commentary on Genesis*, 131-2). Wilbur mentions Adam's naming of the animals in "Icarium Mare," "Lying," and "The Fourth of July."
45. In two senses of the word: "limited" and "biased."