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William Tate

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# Richard Wilbur's *Right Listening*: A Review Essay

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by William Tate

The phenomenon of darkness conditions the possibility of light.<sup>1</sup>

Facts are not entities that simply implant themselves in a vacant mind; they are grasped by a mind trained in a particular culture to grasp them. The same realities presented to a child of three and to a trained scientist will not be the same sort of facts to both of them. The latter's statement of the facts will [be] determined by his or her scientific training.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In two six-line stanzas, Richard Wilbur's "A Barred Owl"<sup>3</sup> presents and then comments on a richly realized anecdote. The first stanza explains

that, when a sleeping child has been awakened during the night by the sound of a barred owl, adults caring for the child tell her that the owl "if rightly listened to" has merely asked "Who cooks for you?" The second stanza provides a rationale for the adults' response to the child's fear. Many adults, perhaps any, who have ever cared for a young child for any length of time probably can recall some similar incident, including the protective desire to provide comfort for the child.

Critics have appreciated the artistry of the poem. Bruce Michelson, one of Wilbur's best readers, calls it "poem-making as high craft."<sup>4</sup> Yet the best available readings of the poem I've discovered, including Michelson's, misrepresent it in at least two overlapping ways. First, they overstate its darkness; the bulk of this essay will address this overstatement by developing a reading of the poem along lines suggested by Charles Taylor. The overstatement tends to obscure a second problem: these interpretations of "A Barred Owl" accept without question the either/or choice presupposed in the light/dark or optimism/pessimism distinctions. I will say a little more about Wilbur's hope in a moment and return to the question of Wilbur's optimism towards the end of the essay.

The first problem, an overemphasis on the darkness of the poem, is especially evident in Michelson's reading. With good reason, Michelson resists the persistent critical caricature of Wilbur as urbanely and somewhat naively optimistic.<sup>5</sup> Rejecting "the idea that [Wilbur's] formalism signals diffidence and prudery," he argues "that Wilbur's notorious reserve encompasses a realm of psychological darkness" (586). And so it does;

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

I heartily endorse the central claims of Michelson's reading. Nevertheless, Michelson's later comments focus on the psychological darkness to the point that he obscures other, balancing, considerations. In particular, he pictures Wilbur's world as frighteningly divided, thereby eclipsing Wilbur's awareness of order. "What barred owls do," he says, "is... horribly opposite" to the alleged domestication of the barred owl with "a question about cooking" (592). "What is going on out there" in the forest "is pure nature, and pure nightmare" (592). Michelson acknowledges that some will regard the poem's "wit and craft as...celebrations of deep noumenal order," but objects: "The trouble for that approach here is that more lurks in these woods," including the troubling awareness that our carefully chosen words only "illusorily 'domesticate a fear.' To listen 'rightly' is to hear the owl self-servingly wrong[ly]" (592). In other words, the owl can only be understood as "a ruthless predator" (592). For Michelson, and others who read the poem as he does, to describe the owl in any other way is to perpetrate a deception, to falsify the world. The poem only speciously appeals to rightness.

Commenting more recently, John Burt similarly bifurcates our possible responses to the world and to the owl. Concerning the adult explanation of the owl's sound he says, "The child is pacified by this, but the adult who says it obviously is not.... Of course the conclusion is wishful thinking. What else could it be?"<sup>6</sup> According to Wilbur, as I will argue, it could be what I will later distinguish as *hopeful* thinking, a posture towards the world that is realistic about its scariness without neglecting its wonders.

Michelson's assessment of the darkness in "A Barred Owl" does more than comment on the human relationship between parents and children; it also has implications for the relationship between human beings and the divine. Michelson's essay, published in the journal *Christianity and Literature*, sets out to problematize (though not to deny) Wilbur's Christianity. He asks, "is this essentially a poetry of faith or not?" (593). Concerning another Wilbur poem, "Lying," he asks "Is Christian faith affirmed, then, or disparaged in 'Lying'?" (596). As I've already indicated with regard to Michelson's opposition of optimism and pessimism, of light

and darkness, the either/or choice in these questions ("faith or not," "affirmed...or disparaged") is inadequate. It seems to deny that faith and doubt can coexist in the same person.

Emily Dickinson, among others, comes closer to an adequate expression in this case. In one of her letters she avers, "Faith is Doubt."<sup>7</sup> Rigid dogmatists might construe the sentence as an expression of committed unbelief, but understood rightly it approaches tautology, in the sense that our experience of faith ordinarily involves an awareness that what we believe is not subject to our ability to prove or verify it. Charles Taylor, to whose work I will turn in a moment, similarly recognizes "the doubt which is inseparable from faith."<sup>8</sup> In an astute reading of Dickinson, Wilbur quotes another of her aphorisms: "'Too much of proof,' she wrote, 'affronts belief.'" For Wilbur, as for Dickinson, faith *is* doubt in such a way that it remains faith. Along the same lines, "hope is deferral" so that like faith it fluctuates through time (I have in mind something like the distinction in Romans 8:24: "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?"<sup>10</sup>). Though hope is, strictly speaking, inconsistent with certainty, it is entirely compatible with confidence.<sup>11</sup> Wilbur's poem is not explicitly theological, but Michelson is correct to regard its tone as relevant for a consideration of the nature of faith. Michelson is mistaken, however, in his assessment of that relevance.

### The Human Linguistic Capacity

The pivotal lines in "A Barred Owl" draw attention to different potential uses of language: words can "make our terrors bravely clear" or they can "domesticate a fear" (7-8). Moreover, the poem as a whole implies several crucial considerations concerning how human beings find or make meaning. In this section I draw on Charles Taylor's *The Language Animal* as a means of bringing into focus the implications of the poem. Here I will foreground two key pieces of Taylor's analysis. First, I want to sketch, though briefly, the distinction he makes between designative and constitutive accounts of language. According to Taylor, an understanding of language as constitutive involves a more robust awareness of the ontogenesis of language than designative accounts typically include. So,

second, I'll explain some key features of language learning. With these ideas from Taylor providing a framework, I'll return to Wilbur's "A Barred Owl" in the next section of the essay.

Taylor calls *The Language Animal* "a book about the human linguistic capacity." Human language, he explains, "includes capacities for meaning creation which go far beyond" the default understanding of modernism, that is, "encoding and communicating information" (ix). He distinguishes "designative" or "enframing" (encoding) concep-

and constitutive accounts of language, chapter 2 develops Taylor's version of a constitutive account by considering how human language develops, paying particular attention to what initiation into a linguistic community involves for a child learner. He begins with the "obvious fact...that children... pick up language from a community or family which is taking care of them, its members talking to each other and talking to them" (52). Simply being in language communities is not the whole picture; rather, "it appears as well that children most

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tions of language<sup>12</sup> from "constitutive" conceptions,<sup>13</sup> and he argues that an account of language as "constitutive" more adequately explains human language use. Designative views presuppose that language aims at expressing a prior "way things are" (my scare quotes); meaning is denotative, synchronic, and (so to speak) atomic. Constitutive views also regard language as seeking to express the way things are, but in addition regard "language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, [and] new meanings" (4).<sup>14</sup> For designative theories of language, "Knowledge consists in having the representation actually square with the reality" (4) (thus for Michelson a barred owl simply is "a ruthless predator,"<sup>15</sup> and to suggest otherwise is to perpetrate deception). For constitutive views, "language enables us to grasp something *as* what it is" (6). Language "involves sensitivity to the issue of rightness" (7), but rightness understood as more (though not less<sup>16</sup>) than the verification of propositions. Rightness, in this broader sense, "involves a kind of gathering of attention which Herder describes as 'reflection'" (9).<sup>17</sup> Meaning is dynamic, diachronic, and holistic.

When he suggests that the parents<sup>18</sup> in "A Barred Owl" mislead the child, Michelson oversimplifies the linguistic relationship between caregiver and child in language learning. After Chapter 1 of *The Language Animal* provides a preliminary description of the difference between designative

effectively acquire new words in actual conversation with parents or other caregivers" (52-53). The conversations he has in mind are not simply verbal exchanges, but begin with "bouts of shared attention," that have been called "protoconversations" (53). By means of such acts of bonding, the parent helps the child give "her early emotional life...its shape." As Taylor explains, "In responding to the child's needs, for food, for relief from pain, for loving contact, the parent is helping her identify her wants, and how they can be fulfilled. What would otherwise turn into emotional storms of frustration are given a definite purpose and a recognizable remedy. The parent gives to the child a kind of protointerpretation of her desires, a grasp of what is distressing her, and how relief can come" (53). The parents in Wilbur's poem help their child cope with her distress in essentially the way Taylor describes, guiding her towards a more appropriate reaction than her initial fearful response to the owl's cry. In a note at this point, Taylor cites a book by Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker, *The First Idea*. Greenspan and Shanker "speak of 'catastrophic feeling states,' often involving a sense of being overwhelmed, which 'are part of a primitive perceptual motor level of central nervous system organization' (28). Their point is that we have to learn to give shape to these, and hence to tame them" (Taylor, 53, n. 4). The metaphor of taming brings us close to Wilbur's recognition in "A Barred Owl" that our

words can “domesticate a fear.”

Emotional development is not language, of course, but in Taylor’s account it is related to language (it is linguistic): language “can only be imparted from within relations of shared emotional bonding, what we might call ‘communion’” (55). The shared focus of “communion” provides a foundation for language learning, so that “the acquisition of our first language...is rooted in common attention” (57).<sup>19</sup> Taylor explains this sharing with reference to “zone[s] of proximal development” (60).<sup>20</sup> To illustrate the concept, Taylor imagines a scenario in which

The child grasps a word...but she also senses that the adult has a deeper grasp, and a wider use. The nearer reaches of this deeper grasp are on the edge of her awareness, as it were.... We can speak of “proximal development” here because the child is on the threshold of this zone. All along the zone is sustained by her sense that there is something more to learn here. But this also means that the zone is sustained by the good pedagogical sense of the teacher, who has to have her own sensitive grasp of where the child is, of what the object commonly focused on means to her. (60)

That the child is in the zone of proximal development means, in this case, that the child is open in the direction of fuller understanding; because of the relationship she has with her caregivers, she is in a good mental and emotional space for receiving instruction. She experiences, and perhaps partly recognizes, that “we acquire language in exchange” (61).<sup>21</sup>

With this explanation of language acquisition in place, Taylor returns to his description of a constitutive account of language: “acquiring language involves not just taking hold of a new tool; it also changes our world, and introduces new meanings into our lives” (61). In particular, the acquisition of language includes not only picking up on the (denotative) meanings of words but also developing various senses of rightness. Taylor distinguishes task rightness, descriptive rightness, and ritual rightness. Task rightness is “imperative” and occurs when the child says the word “more” and succeeds in acquiring “additional spoonfuls [sic] of por-

ridge” (62). Descriptive rightness is “declarative” and “is backed by awareness of criteria.” Either of these might merge with ritual rightness when they become “vehicles of sharing.” As Taylor explains, “The child who announces ‘doggie gone,’” in addition to describing the state of things (and thus achieving declarative rightness), may also be “initiating, or prolonging and intensifying, a sharing of attention with the adult.” The child begins to understand that “[words] enable the creation of communion.” Language becomes ritual rightness when it “prolongs and intensifies communion” (62).<sup>22</sup>

The child’s initiation into language eventually allows her to engage in “fully developed descriptive rightness.” But it also introduces her to “the task of defining and redefining our desires and longings in order to be able to live with the pattern of fulfillments and frustrations we undergo.” And Taylor admits, “This turns out to be an unending human task, which in its later modes we could describe as: finding the meanings which can make sense—bearable sense—of our lives” (63). Finally, “The child not only learns the right words, she also learns the right behavior” (63). Linguistic communion helps bring about the normalization of such right behavior (makes it feel normal), and cumulative normativity lets “human societies develop a sense of the whole order in which they are set, social, and...inevitably also cosmic” (64). The intersubjectivity of communion precedes and enables the development of selfhood, though the individual human self eventually discovers “a particular take on a common linguistically constituted world” (67).

Taylor’s constitutive account of language might reasonably be recognized as a non-theological analogue of the theological concept of accommodation (understood as an aspect of faith). Early versions of the concept occur in Tertullian, for example, but modern discussions often focus on John Calvin. In a well-known passage Calvin expressly associates his teaching with questions concerning the Bible’s anthropomorphic representations of God. He asks, “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.”<sup>23</sup> The

idea is that, because human beings are finite and temporal, our understanding lacks the comprehensiveness of God's understanding. Moreover, because our knowing is finite and temporal, it will (in our earthly experience) continue to be revisable and corrigible (not because truth itself changes, but because our finite understanding remains in flux).

Merold Westphal develops the traditional insight for a context including postmodernism. In making the point that "theological rigor" calls for the theologian (or the ordinary human being) "to

with regard to Christian faith in particular, something along these lines seems indicated by John 17:12-13, for example).<sup>25</sup> Perhaps being in the zone of proximal development (or something very like it) is proper, ordinary—to be expected—for adult members of faith communities, including Wilbur's Christianity.

### Right Listening in "A Barred Owl"

With Taylor's description of the human linguistic capacity in place as a context, let me make a

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think about God as humans should think about God rather than to think about God as God thinks about God," he says that he has "often come back to this homely analogy. My three-year-old son is sucking on a quarter. I tell him not to put coins in his mouth. He asks why not. Since he lacks an understanding of viruses and bacteria, and doesn't even have these words in his vocabulary, I tell him, 'Because they have little, invisible bugs on them that can make you sick if they get inside you. Remember how awful you felt last time you were sick?'" Westphal continues, "This is...parentally revealed misinformation about sucking on coins. It is false [in one sense], but it is how the boy ought to think about the matter. But just for that reason, we probably shouldn't simply call it false."<sup>24</sup>

These examples are pertinent for Wilbur's poem because they make the same assumption Wilbur apparently makes: that when an adult adjusts her language in speaking to a child for the sake of the child's better understanding, something importantly distinct from lying is the result. Moreover, they suggest an answer to Michelson's problematization of Wilbur's faith. If it is appropriate for the child not to know everything all at once, but rather to trust her parents to guide her into fuller knowing as she matures, then perhaps it is appropriate for adult knowers also not to know everything all at once, but to come into knowing gradually (and

few suggestions with regard to how we might understand "A Barred Owl." Each of the poem's two stanzas comprises a single sentence. The first establishes the scenario; the second supplies comment. The stanzas visualize two different (but also related) settings and perspectives.<sup>26</sup> These are contrasted with reference to inside/outside, domestic/wild, cooked/raw, safe/scary, and so on. The problem, of course, is that the outside seems to invade the inside by means of "an owl's voice." The perceived invasion of one world by the other, along with the two worlds' mirroring of each other, appears in words that indicate similarities: the "small child" would presumably feel a certain kinship with the "small thing." Her "darkened room" anticipates the "dark branch" where the owl is at home; "not listening" supplies a particularization of "rightly listen[ing]." Finally, the suspicion that the owl has no one to cook for it as raised by the imagined question is confirmed by "eaten raw." The parents in the poem help the child articulate and inhabit these tensions by providing her with (initiating her into) "a common linguistically constituted world."

Wilbur characteristically chooses his words with great care, and several words in "A Barred Owl" call for particular notice. "Warping" indicates as early as the second word of the poem that the meaning of the sound heard in the next line has been conditioned already by its passage from its source to

the listening ears and perceiving minds. “To warp” is to bend or twist out of shape; in this meaning-aware context, to warp thus indicates a departure from rightness that occurs between the source of the phenomenon and perception of it. The sound that reaches the child’s awareness is not “pure” phenomenon but has been distorted before it reaches her and now needs to be corrected. Meaning has become involved in the sound, precisely because the child is functioning in the linguistic dimension.

In the second line “voice” also presupposes the linguistic dimension. Whereas “sound” refers to a sensation caused in the ear by vibration of the surrounding air...[,] ‘voice’ refers to the faculty of speech in...humans.”<sup>27</sup> Attributing a “voice” to the owl thus personifies the owl; it’s reasonable to infer that Wilbur wants readers to notice the personification. If we do, then we are prepared to recognize that any attribution to the owl of affect or motive or attitude will personify—and our recognition will demystify—not only the safe friendliness offered to the child by her caregivers, but also the cruelty presupposed by Michelson.

In the remainder of the first stanza, the parents (“We”) “[give] the child...a grasp of what is distressing her, and how relief can come” (Taylor, 53).<sup>28</sup> The child, startled awake by the owl’s noise, turns readily to her parents. That is, she tacitly recognizes in them an ability to help her understand her world better and accepts her place in (and further initiation into) the language community they define. (She is in “the zone of proximal development.”) Movement from “we” (comprising only the adults) to “us” signals the child’s entry into the space of shared meaning made available by the parents: the “us” clearly includes the child among those whom the owl’s “question” reaches. The parents guide the child’s understanding of rightness. Michelson’s reading presupposes that the parents ought to provide descriptive rightness, but Taylor helps us recognize that task rightness (the child’s knowing how to react, how to go “back to sleep”) and possibly ritual rightness (reinforcement of the sense of communion she shares with her parents) are also relevant for the poem (though descriptive rightness remains pertinent, as I will suggest in a moment).

The “odd question” obviously expands the traditional anglophone rendering of the owl’s sound

(the convention that owls say “who,” especially relevant for the barred owl, also called the hoot owl). “Odd,” like “warping,” alerts us to the tenuousness of our human efforts to find meaning in the sound made by the owl. The anthropomorphizing question,<sup>29</sup> which seems misleading on the surface, nevertheless tacitly acknowledges that the owl eats its meals raw, since it has no one to cook for it.<sup>30</sup> It admits into the poem’s discourse the relevance of a consideration of what the owl eats for the girl’s fear (so the question discloses as well as concealing; it enacts descriptive rightness). The question thus implies a sort of apology for the owl, which has no choice but to fend for itself. By admitting the relevance of eating, the question also leaves open for the child a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the owl when she is more mature.<sup>31</sup> (We are able to anticipate this improved understanding when we are willing to treat meaning as constitutive, emergent for us in dialogical exchange.)

The second stanza introduces direct reflection on how words mean. Words can, but need not, “make our terrors bravely clear.” To make terror clear suggests focusing attention on terror. “Bravely” seems strangely placed at first. We are likely to try to make the phrasing mean that it is courageous to face our terrors, but grammatically the term modifies “clear.” When Wilbur engages in this kind of play, we need to pay careful attention. Here it is worth considering whether we should hear behind the English word its Spanish source, “bravo,” which can mean not only “courageous” but also “savage and untamed.” (The Spanish word, more directly than the English, recalls derivation from the Latin *barbarus*.) To “make...terrors bravely clear” suggests not only that it is courageous to face one’s terrors clear-eyed, but also, perhaps (and with regard to some circumstances), that there may be something savage about insisting on such a direct confrontation in every case.

For the child, whose sense of performative rightness arises from the “shared emotional bonding” Taylor calls “communion” (55), words may quite properly “domesticate a fear.” I’ve already treated “domesticate” as a synonym for “tame.” It’s worth noticing, in addition, the word’s etymology: “to (cause to) belong to the house.” Understanding of the barred owl will not actually make it a mem-

ber of the household imagined in the poem, but understanding, developed in the ongoing linguistic maturation of the child, will at least make the owl a more acceptable neighbor. It may be that, for the time being, as she trusts her parents, right listening will amount to “not listening.” The sound the owl makes that is pertinent to its hunting activities is, effectively, no sound, “the sound of stealthy flight.” Putting it colloquially, the flight of the owl is not meant to be heard (and therefore it is not something to be listened for). The parents appropriately nurture the girl towards a right reaction to the owl

world is fundamentally a great wonder and a great order, yes, I subscribe to those things.” Though “hope” is sometimes used as a synonym for “optimism,” I here mean to distinguish the two terms along lines suggested by Wilbur’s comment, using “hope” to designate the second kind of optimism he identifies. I have borrowed the phrase “exercise in hope” from his late poem “Sir David Brewster’s Toy,” where it registers a resigned and contented anticipation of ongoing change within an ordered whole. As “exercise” suggests, hope is in motion; it adjusts for the contingencies of finite, temporal hu-

## Hope perseveres through ongoing, meaning-making responsiveness to the world (through linguistic constitution, to recall Taylor).

by discerning the question behind her fear (“is the thing that made that noise a threat to me?”) and then by helping her receive affectively the true—and right—answer (“no”).

### **Towards Conclusion: Beyond Pessimism and Optimism**

By accepting optimism and pessimism as defining poles for Wilbur criticism, Michelson and others (such as Burt) presuppose the inevitability of an either/or choice: darkness excludes light, doubt seems irreconcilable with faith, multivocality is presumed to be incompatible with truth, and so on. In an effort to get beyond the optimism/pessimism construction (or possibly deconstruction) of Wilbur’s meaning, I want to describe Wilbur’s ordinary approach to the world as an “exercise in hope.” “Ordinary” here acknowledges that Wilbur never attempted to express a rigorously systematic philosophical or theological stance; nevertheless, his works demonstrate sustained interest in a number of philosophically and theologically interesting emphases, including a persistent confidence with regard to the wholeness and overall goodness of the world.<sup>32</sup>

The distinction I’m after is indicated by Wilbur’s answer to a question from Arlo Haskell in a 2009 interview.<sup>33</sup> Haskell asked, “Are you an optimist by nature?” Wilbur replied, “If an optimist is somebody who thinks everything will come out all right, I’m not. But if it’s optimistic to think that the

man experience.<sup>34</sup> Hope of this kind shapes a number of Wilbur’s major poetic meditations, including “Lying,” “All That Is,” “Fabrications,” “Icarium Mare,” and “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.” Such exercises in hope, though they incorporate what Michelson calls “psychological darkness,” counter that darkness with light.

Hope perseveres through ongoing, meaning-making responsiveness to the world (through linguistic constitution, to recall Taylor). If optimism seems naive, and thus like Paul Ricoeur’s “primitive naïveté,” hope is clear-eyed and disciplined, so that it is more like Ricoeur’s “second naïveté,” reconciling critical thought and experience with confident expectation.<sup>35</sup> Thus “exercise” gets at the dynamism of human meaning-making in something like the way Wilbur expresses this in “An Event.” “It is by words and the defeat of words,” he says there, “That for a flying moment one may see / By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt” (21, 23-24). In other words, when human beings express an understanding of the world in language, their attempt accomplishes real and legitimate access to things as they are, but because we are finite and temporal, this access is never total, never statically achieved. The child in “A Barred Owl” gains the knowledge she needs in the moment of the poem, but her experience of linguistic development in “communion” also prepares her for additional knowledge later—and again later. (Among other

things, being in the linguistic dimension addresses affect as well as understanding; we may say that, in addition to being informed by our intellectual cognition, our knowing is formed by our affective cognition.) For the girl, as for all of us, understanding sometimes breaks down or calls for correction, and we try again. We position ourselves in the zone of proximal development (or something like it), anticipating improved understanding. Although for some this unrelenting dynamism might invite pessimism, Wilbur regards it as hopeful. For him, linguistic constitution regularly refreshes and reveals the wonder of the world.

As with hope, so with faith. Although Wilbur's poem is not overtly theological, Michelson rightly recognizes that its depiction of human life potentially impinges on theological concerns. Michelson is wrong, however, to construe the poem as foregrounding doubt at the expense of faith. On the contrary, the poem briefly models the exercise of trust within community as the properly dialogical response of faith to doubt. For the speaker of the poem, right listening is listening that is attuned to the contingent circumstances emergent for particular individuals at particular times.

#### Endnotes

1. Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 167-168. Although I will focus on the work of Charles Taylor in what follows, Sokolowski's work on similar themes has informed my appropriation of Taylor.
2. Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 76.
3. Richard Wilbur, *Collected Poems: 1943-2004* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004). Hereafter cited by titles and line numbers.
4. Bruce Michelson, "Richard Wilbur's Music of Pure Cold," *Christianity and Literature* 42.4 (Summer 1993): 585-600; 592. Nearly all of the published commentary on "A Barred Owl" is in the form of very brief comments in reviews of Wilbur's poetry (like those of John Burt, mentioned below). Michelson's is the most fully developed reading I've discovered.
5. His thesis in "Pure Cold" builds on the argument of his earlier book, *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).
6. John Burt, "Notes on Some Recent Poetry," *The Southern Review* 37.4 (Autumn 2001): 838.
7. <http://archive.emilydickinson.org/letter/thb90.htm>.
8. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 214. Hereafter cited by page number.
9. Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," in *Responses: Prose Pieces 1953-1976* (New York: Harper Brace Jovanovich, 1976): 3-15; 14.
10. English Standard Version.
11. The distinction is suggested by Newbigin's *Proper Confidence*.
12. Taylor uses the acronym HLC, discussing Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac as early proponents of designative views, though he argues that features of their views persist in more recent (and arguably more sophisticated) versions.
13. Taylor uses the acronym HHH, discussing Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Georg Hamann, and Wilhelm von Humboldt as early proponents of constitutive views, though his development of a constitutive account goes beyond their insights, drawing on a number of more recent thinkers.
14. Let me emphasize that for Taylor, constitution respects factual correctness; not just any meaning will do. But meaning involves more than bare facts.
15. Properly speaking, "predator" is unproblematically designative, while "ruthless" functions constitutively. The issue here is that Michelson takes the constitutive descriptor as self-evidently normative (as if it were designative).
16. It should be noted that Taylor is not opposed to empirical verifiability, which certainly has its place, for example in the natural sciences.
17. Herder's word is *Besonnenheit*.
18. The poem simply refers to an apparently adult "we." It seems reasonable to assume that reference is to the child's parents, though other caregivers (including, for example, grandparents) are possible.
19. Taylor connects "common attention" with Michael

Tomasello's phrase "joint attentional frames," citing *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 22. In joint attentional frames, "two speakers share the same reference."

20. The term derives from Lev Vygotsky, but Taylor borrows it from Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 177. As a convenience, I am appropriating Taylor's use of the phrase to my own purposes without necessarily endorsing the details of its usage by Vygotsky and Donald.
21. Vygotsky's notion of zones of proximal development recalls, in several respects, Hans-Georg Gadamer's characterization of the fusion of horizons that occurs in the ongoing human dialogue. See his discussion in the closing section of the Second Part of *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
22. Taylor's account is informed by Catholic doctrine. According to Taylor, "Ritual can be both a reenactment of something (the Canon of the Mass in relation to the Last Supper), and also an effecting and enacting of what is represented (the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ)" (69).
23. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.13.1. For discussion, see Michael Tinker, "John Calvin's Concept of Divine Accommodation: A Hermeneutical Corrective," *Churchman* (Winter 2004): 325-358. Tinker mentions early examples of the doctrine of accommodation in Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as in Tertullian (327).
24. Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 80.
25. A well-known poem by Emily Dickinson associates metaphysical, and tacitly theological, accommodation with the parental accommodation by means of which adults address children. "Tell All the Truth," number 1263 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), recommends a gradual approach to truth; the details suggest that truth here is transcendent (or perhaps absolute) truth, *the* truth, rather than simply some particu-

lar truth (it is "too bright for our infirm Delight," that is, for our fallible and finite human apprehension of it):

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—  
 Success in Circuit lies  
 Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth's superb surprise  
 As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind—

The poem neither denies nor resists truth; moreover, it wants the whole truth, "all the truth." For finite human beings, however, "Truth's superb surprise" is so dazzling that being exposed to it all at once would strike us blind. Given our limits, our best hope of "Success" with regard to appropriating truth is "in Circuit" as one who follows a circuitous or zig-zag ("slant") route in order to get to the top of a mountain. (Literary precedents include Francis Petrarch's "Ascent of Mount Ventoux" and John Donne's description of climbing a mountain towards "Truth" in his "Satire III.") The parents in Wilbur's poem offer the child an "explanation kind."

26. Wilbur regularly cultivates such contrasts: clear examples include "A Wall in the Woods: Cummington" and "Altitudes."
27. I quote from [https://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-sound-and-vs-voice/#:-:text=The%20word%20'sound'%20refers%20to,surrounding%20air%20or%20other%20medium.&text=On%20the%20other%20hand%20the,the%20tenor%20in%20your%20voice'](https://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-sound-and-vs-voice/#:-:text=The%20word%20'sound'%20refers%20to,surrounding%20air%20or%20other%20medium.&text=On%20the%20other%20hand%20the,the%20tenor%20in%20your%20voice).
28. Michelson and Burt would perhaps take the "we" as implicating not only the parents but adults generally in a censorship undertaken for the sake of children. The first-person plural is significant here, on the contrary, because it recognizes the construction of meaning as a communal activity.
29. Recall that anthropomorphism is the issue addressed by the theological concept of accommodation.
30. We may notice in passing the reminder of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), that "empirical categories—such as the categories of the

- raw and the cooked—... can only be accurately defined by ethnographic observation and...by adopting the standpoint of a particular culture” (1). The recognition here that at least some significances are culturally constructed resonates with Taylor’s argument and with Wilbur’s scenario, though Lévi-Strauss frames his project anthropologically rather than phenomenologically.
31. The imagery suggests an analogy between cooking food and the interpretation of “raw” experience by means of articulation. In an overview of Wilbur’s career (into the mid-1980s, so before he wrote “A Barred Owl”), Wendy Salinger, in *Richard Wilbur’s Creation*, ed. Salinger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), says that Wilbur’s effort to bring mind to form “is correctly expressed in his statement about the transformation of raw event into experience. We do not *possess* experience except as it is processed through the mind [Taylor would add: linguistically]. It is ‘raw,’ undigested and therefore uncaptured [undomesticated]...until won to us by the labors of the imagination” (6).
  32. Wilbur expresses this confidence very clearly in “Some Notes on ‘Lying,’” in Richard Wilbur, *The Catbird’s Song: Prose Pieces 1963-1995* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997): 135-152.
  33. The interview is available online under the title “The World is Fundamentally a Great Wonder,” accessed 8/21/21 at [https://www.kwls.org/key-wests-life-of-letters/the\\_world\\_is\\_fundamentally\\_a\\_g/](https://www.kwls.org/key-wests-life-of-letters/the_world_is_fundamentally_a_g/).
  34. Consider here the relationship among “suffering,” “endurance,” and “hope” in Romans 5:1-5. To my mind, “endurance” resonates with Wilbur’s “exercise.”
  35. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 351. For both Wilbur and Ricoeur, the relationship between experience and expectation resonates broadly with traditional Christian teaching (as, for example, with the connection between experience and hope in Romans 5:1-5).