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Stained Forever by a Sanguine Glow

David Schelhaas
Dordt College

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Stained Forever by a Sanguine Glow

Abstract

"It is National Poetry Month and I want to celebrate the month with a little essay about the poet Richard Wilbur and his poem 'October Maples.'"

Posting about the delight in Richard Wilbur's poetry from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/stained-forever-by-a-sanguine-glow/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

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April 14, 2017

Dave Schelhaas

It is National Poetry Month and I want to celebrate the month with a little essay about the poet Richard Wilbur and his poem “October Maples.” At ninety-six years of age, Wilbur is probably our oldest, living, major American poet, and in my opinion, he has been the pre-eminent Christian poet writing in English in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Of course, not all of his poems are explicitly Christian. He is a Christian who writes poems; sometimes they are overtly Christian, but often they are not. In all of his works, though, one senses his belief that the poet must, as he has said (quoting Milton), reflect how all things “Rising and falling still advance His praise.”

Wilbur has published thirteen books of poetry and many translations of French poets and playwrights, especially Moliere. He is a formalist, which is to say, most of his poems use regular meter and rhyme. He has won two Pulitzer prizes for poetry and was the second “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.”

Wilbur’s last collection of poetry, *Mayflies*, was published in 2000 when he was seventy-nine years old. The brilliant title poem of this volume, “Mayflies,” begins with a description of quadrillions of mayflies moving, not as a “muddled swarm,” but as one entity that rose and fell

So that they all composed a manifold
And figured scene,
And seemed the weavers of some cloth of gold,
Or the fine pistons of some bright machine.

Seeing these flies and (earlier in the poem) the stars harmoniously doing what they have been called to do, the speaker for a moment feels isolated and alone but then wonders if perhaps he is “one whose task is joyfully to see/ How fair the fiats of the caller are.”

When the speaker of “Mayflies” says he has been called by the creator/caller to see the fairness of his commands (and *fair* here certainly suggests both of its common meanings—*just* and *beautiful*), he is speaking not only of the human task in general but of his task as poet. Few poets in the last half century have given us sharper, more evocative, more celebratory depictions of creation unfolding according to the commands of the Creator.

Since space is limited in this forum, I am going to take a single Wilbur poem, “October Maples, Portland,” and read through it with you, pointing out along the way some of the most celebratory depictions of creation that I have seen in contemporary poetry.

OCTOBER MAPLES, PORTLAND

The leaves, though little time they have to live,
Were never so unfallen as today,
And seem to yield us through a rustled sieve
The very light from which time fell away.

A showered fire we thought forever lost
Redeems the air. Where friends in passing meet,
They parley in the tongues of Pentecost.
Gold ranks of temples flank the dazzled street.

It is a light of maples, and will go;
But not before it washes eye and brain
With such a tincture, such a sanguine glow
As cannot fail to leave a lasting stain.

So Mary's laundered mantle (in the tale
Which, like all pretty tales, may still be true),
Spread on the rosemary-bush, so drenched the pale
Slight blooms in its irradiated hue,

They could not choose, but to return in blue.

—Richard Wilbur

Wilbur paints here a beautiful picture of the natural world, a picture of autumn maple trees in New England, and he simultaneously creates a scene so luminous, joyful, and harmonious, that it seems to radiate the presence of God. He creates this double effect with such ease, such natural language and rhyme that at first reading one scarcely notices the supernatural subtext.

Anyone who has lived in New England or Michigan or any other state that had really brilliant fall colors knows what Wilbur is talking about when he says "It is the light of maples." Golden maple leaves seen in the right angle of sunlight seem to have a glow that comes from within. It "dazzles" the street, it yields through the "rustling sieve" of the leaves the "light from which time fell away" which is, of course, eternity, or Eden or heaven.

Already in the second line of the poem we see a lovely play on words that takes us into theological territory. The leaves are "unfallen," that is, they are still on the tree, but more importantly, unlike the natural world of Romans 2 which groans under the burden of sin, these leaves seem not to have been touched by sin. Dancing through these leaves is a light that is eternal, time has fallen away from it.

And in the second line of the second stanza we have another theological word, "redeems." The light, a "showered fire," "redeems the air." The word *redeems* suggests air made pure, air no longer polluted by sin. The image of a "showered fire" suggests the tongues of fire that appeared at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out. According to the book of Acts, when this occurred, each person gathered there—and they represented many different races and tongues—heard the apostles declaring the wonders of God in his tongue. Such harmony, such pure communication, is experienced by the speaker of this poem and his friends as they walk in the glow of the maple trees. They are almost giddy as they walk what seem to be the fabled heavenly streets of gold.

Soon, however, the poem's speaker comes back to his senses and observes in stanza three that it is simply the light of maples, and it will not last. But he quickly asserts that even if these were just maple trees, their beauty and the sense of the presence of God that they exuded have been so profound that all who entered into their presence have been "stained" forever by the experience.

Here, with the combination of "sanguine glow" and "stain," Wilbur works his finest magic. The word *sanguine* means in popular usage hopeful, cheerful, confident; but it literally means bloody or blood-red. Read in the theological context that Wilbur has created in this poem, the word suggests it is the blood of Christ that stains these friends. This, of course, is not the stain of sin that I mentioned earlier but the stain of redemption, the stain of the presence of God.

Have you felt that? Have you wanted to exclaim in some particular setting, "This is holy ground. We're standing on holy ground!" Have you wanted to fall on your knees in the presence of mystery and wonder and beauty and cry "Glory"? Sometimes we call such a feeling the experience of God's immanence. The presence of God in the creation. You know it when you experience it.

Some people feel that the last five lines of the poem might better have been left out of the poem because they take us out of the moment of the maple experience and into the world of a medieval Christian fable. Sometimes I agree. But one could argue that the “could not choose” of the final line, taken with the “cannot fail” of line twelve, makes a powerful statement about the irresistible nature of this staining process. One might even call this irresistible grace.

Either way, Wilbur absolutely entralls me with this poem. The rhythm, the rhyme, and especially the nuanced diction allow me for a moment to see and experience what he must have seen or imagined: a few moments of absolute comfort, delight, and wonder.