Why poetry matters

Richard Wilbur died last month. He was, Dana Gioia said, the finest poet of his generation and the greatest American Christian poet since Eliot.

Here's an example of why I liked him so much. It's part of a toast he gave at his eldest son's wedding. (I recited it at the marriage of our youngest.)

"St. John tells how at Cana's wedding feast/ The water pots poured wine in such amount/ That by his sober count/ There were a hundred gallons at the least./ It made no earthly sense unless to show/ How whatsoever love elects to bless/ Brims to a sweet excess/ That can without depletion overflow."

I'm sure there are better examples, but this little snippet shows two things I honor him for. The first is his sense of rhyme and meter. His poems seem effortless, as though it's the most natural thing in the world to speak in iambic pentameter. And they are musical, but the music fits precisely into each sentence.

I wish our modern church hymns had this congruence. How often I find myself inwardly complaining that the lines leave me off balance or that I can't sing a flock of consonants perched on a string of eighth notes.

Wilbur wrote poems you could set to music. He was Leonard Bernstein's collaborator on "Candide."

The same gift made him a wonderful translator. A few years ago our drama department did a performance of "Tartuffe" in Wilbur's translation. It's a funny play.

But Wilbur's version was more than just a successful play on stage. It was, like Moliere's original, a work of poetry in rhymed couplets (10 syllables — not alexandrines, but maybe that pace is better for English speakers).

I said Wilbur's wedding toast showed two things I liked. Beauty is one. The other is a conviction that, if we look closely enough, we will see that the world is fundamentally good, even blessed.

The miracle at Cana made no earthly sense, but there it was. The wine overflowed,

as the five barley loaves multiplied later in John's Gospel.

The physics of it is puzzling. But try this instead. We know it works like that with love. The more we give away, the more we have.

"Whatsoever love elects to bless/ Brims to a sweet excess/ That can without depletion overflow." Perhaps Wilbur was thinking of his own marriage of 64 years.

Or maybe he was speaking from faith rather than love. In a 1977 interview with The Paris Review, he offered this:

"I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy, that the energy tends to take pattern and shape, and that the ultimate character of things is comely and good. I am perfectly aware that I say this in the teeth of all sorts of contrary evidence, and that I must be basing it partly on temperament and partly on faith, but that is my attitude."

These two things I admire in Wilbur's poetry are actually related to one another. In postmodern poetry, music, painting, we see a kind of chaotic eclecticism that mirrors a universe in disorder.

For Wilbur, the energy of the universe "take(s) pattern and shape." We see the same regularity in his verse forms and meters. They are comely, like the world they describe.

And good. A universe governed by entropy will eventually die of its own disorder, the physicists say. It has no point. It is neither good nor bad.

The universe that God created is, as the Book of Wisdom says, arranged "by measure and number and weight." And it has a point. It was made for the glory of God.

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