

Ouachita Baptist University

## Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

---

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

---

4-16-1983

### A Close Look at Two Poems by Richard Wilbur

Jay Curlin

*Ouachita Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors\\_theses](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Curlin, Jay, "A Close Look at Two Poems by Richard Wilbur" (1983). *Honors Theses*. 209.  
[https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors\\_theses/209](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/209)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

H&B.52

CUR

A CLOSE LOOK AT  
TWO POEMS BY RICHARD WILBUR

Jay Curlin

Submitted  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of  
the University Honors Program  
Ouachita Baptist University  
The Department of English  
Independent Study Project  
Dr. John Wink  
Dr. Susan Wink  
Dr. Herman Sandford  
16 April 1983

## INTRODUCTION

For the past three semesters, I have had the pleasure of studying the techniques of prosody under the tutelage of Dr. John Wink. In this study, I have read a large amount of poetry and have studied several books on prosody, the most influential of which was Poetic Meter and Poetic Form by Paul Fussell. This splendid book increased vastly my knowledge of poetry, and through it and other books, I became a much more sensitive, intelligent reader of poems.

The problem with my study came when I tried to decide how to incorporate what I had learned into a scholarly paper, for it seemed that any attempt to do so would result in the mere parroting of the words of Paul Fussell and others. Then Dr. Wink pointed out to me that the best way to show what I have learned in a creative, original paper would be to fully explicate two or three poems, relying on my own opinions and judgments, rather than on those of others. Such a paper would be the best indication of whether or not I had truly learned to utilize the tools of prosody.

This paper is the result of that sage advice. In it I have discussed at some length two poems by Richard Wilbur, one of the finest craftsmen I have yet encountered in English verse. It is because of this craftsmanship that I have used his poems as the focus of my study, for his poetry is rich with all the conventional poetic techniques that provide the prosodist with a wealth of things to say. But his poetry is

much more than merely clever techniques; the content of his poetry is what makes his poems great. Richard Wilbur is a poet with great insight and much to tell the world, and in this paper I attempt to illustrate that fact.

## PART I

### REDNESS, BRASS, LADDERS AND HATS

"A Fire-Truck" is a passionate, exclamatory poem of praise of an incident that is, for both the persona and the reader, in immediate progress. Although this incident would be for many a fairly commonplace occurrence, and certainly nothing for which to sing praises, the persona is strongly affected by it, and he proceeds to point out to the reader in very convincing terms the reasons for his praise,

In this poem Wilbur has taken a classical stanzaic form and has made some interesting variations in it. The Sapphic stanza, the attempt to reproduce in English the original stanza of Sappho, is a quatrain consisting of three eleven-syllable lines followed by a five-syllable line; it is a verse form of dactyls combined with trochees or anapests with iambs, with an Adonic for the fourth line. Now, although none of the quatrains of this poem meet all of the requirements for a pure Sapphic stanza, Wilbur is obviously playing around with this form; in fact, he really does not stray very far from the boundaries of this rigid, inflexible form, creating what Paul Fussell would call a pseudo-Sapphic variation.

There are many similarities between Wilbur's "variation" and a pure Sapphic stanza, the most noticeable being its typography. The three lines followed by the short fourth line look exactly like a pure Sapphic stanza; in fact, the final short line is an invariable sign of

the Sapphic or the Sapphic-derived quatrain. Here is a pure Sapphic stanza from Isaac Watt's "The Day of Judgment":

When the fierce north wind with his airy forces  
Rears up the Baltic to a foaming fury,  
And the red lightning with a storm of hail comes  
Rushing amain down,

and here is a stanza from "A Fire-Truck":

Right down the shocked street with a siren-blast  
That sends all else skittering to the curb,  
Redness, brass, ladders and hats hurl past,  
Blurring to sheer verb,

They seem identical in form on the page; it is only when one submits the two stanzas to the techniques of scansion that it becomes obvious that there are some definite dissimilarities between the two.

The first apparent difference is the syllabic count. Wilbur only meets the eleven-syllable line requirement twice: in lines two and three of the third quatrain. All of the rest of the first three lines of each quatrain come close to meeting this requirement, varying in syllabic count from nine to fifteen. The required syllabic count for the fourth line is only met once: the five-syllable line of the first quatrain. This line is also unique in that it is an Adonic, and is for that matter the only dimeter line in the entire poem. The fourth lines of the other quatrains come close to meeting the five-syllable line requirement, two being seven-syllable lines and one being a six-syllable line.

Another difference is that the pure Sapphic stanza's dominant foot is either a dactyl or a trochee, for it attempts to imitate by dactyls or trochees the quantities of the original stanza of Sappho. Wilbur, though, has written this poem on an iambic base: there are thirty-three iambs and twelve anapests, while only eleven trochees and seven

dactyls. Poets such as George Herbert have written pseudo-Sapphic variations with iambic bases, while shortening the three long lines to tetrameters. But Wilbur has written almost all of the three-line sections in pentameter, the exceptions being lines two and three of the first quatrain, which are tetrameter, and the hexameter second line of the second quatrain. While having established an iambic base, he has at the same time brought in a fair share of dactyls, trochees, and spondees--the original feet of the Sapphic stanza--as effective substitute feet. He has indeed written a very impressive variation of a very inflexible form.

Wilbur made a fine choice in using this particular type of stanza for this poem, for it contributes very much to the meaning in at least a couple of ways. Paul Fussell tells us in Poetic Meter and Poetic Form: "Because of its inevitable associations with the poems of Sappho, the Sapphic stanza, and even fairly distant pseudo-Sapphic variations of it, seems to imply a certain degree of passion and seriousness." This aspect of the Sapphic stanza fits perfectly for this poem; the persona is both serious and passionate in his praise for the fire-truck. The first two quatrains are enjambed into one long sentence with an exclamation point at the end, and the very next line is the persona's passionate cry:

Beautiful, heavy, unweary, loud, obvious thing!

The second aspect of the form's appropriateness for this poem is that it is an imitation of a classical form, while Wilbur uses as one of his principal images a phoenix, a fabulous bird found in classical antiquity. In using classical imagery in a classical form, Wilbur obtains harmony between the subject matter and the form.

One other aspect of the form's appropriateness for this poem is perhaps unintentional: its shape is suggestive of the shape of a fire-truck. The first three lines call to mind the elongated frame of a fire-truck, and the short fourth line seems suggestive of its wheels.

Here is the scansion on which the following prosodical discussion is based:

Right down/ the shocked/ street with/ a si/ ren-blast/  
 That sends/ all else/ skittering/ to the curb,/  
 Redness,/ brass, lad/ ders, and hats/ hurl past,/  
 Blurring to/ sheer verb,/

Shift at the/ corner/ into/ uproar/ ious gear/  
 And make/ it around/ the turn/ in a/ squall of/ traction/  
 The head/ long bell/ maintain/ ing sure/ and clear,/  
 Thought is de/ graded/ action!//

Beautiful,/ heavy, un/ weary,/ loud, ob/ vious thing!/  
 I stand/ here purged/ of nuance/ --my mind/ a blank./  
 All I was/ brooding/ upon/ has tak/ en wing,/  
 And I/ have you/ to thank./

As you howl/ beyond hear/ ing I car/ ry you in/ to my mind,/  
 Ladders/ and brass/ and all,/ there to/ admire/  
 Your phoe/ nix-red/ simplic/ ity,/ enshrined/  
 In that not/ extin/ guished fire./

As I have mentioned above, the meter of the poem varies, though the majority of the lines are pentameter. L2Q1 and L3Q1 are each tetrameter, and L2Q2 is hexameter. Except for the dimeter line of L4Q1, the fourth line of each quatrain is trimeter.



Wilbur does wonderful things with substitute feet in this poem, showing what a fine craftsman he is with metrical variations. A good example of this is the dactylic substitution in the third position of L2Q1. This reversal in the midst of an iambic line creates the sense of sudden movement, and the complete reversal in the anapestic fourth position creates the situation in which there is a succession of four unaccented syllables, a metrical device which gives the reader a feeling of lightness and rapidity. The reader is given a "metrical vision" of people skittering like mice to the curb.

Another metrical variation worthy of mention is found in L2Q2. We are in a rising line when all of a sudden a pyrrhic in the fourth position leads us into two trochaic substitutions, which help create the sense of the tires squealing as they make the turn. The double "l's" of "squall" also aid this, because one naturally draws the word out, adding to the sense of that slow motion movement of a vehicle squalling around a turn. These two trochaic substitutions are set off even more by the straight iambic pentameter line that immediately follows. Metrical variations such as these and others in the poem are extremely successful in adding to the meaning and effect of the lines in which they are found.

"A Fire-Truck" follows the rime scheme of ABAB, a scheme which it maintains in every quatrain. The only feminine rimes in the poem are the "traction/action" rimes of L2Q2 and L4Q2. All of the rimes are true rimes in this rime scheme.

There is a good deal of alliteration at work in this poem, as is seen especially in the alliterative combinations of words beginning with "s." In the first two quatrains we find: shocked street/ siren/

sends/ skittering/ sheer/ shift/ squall/ sure. The "shocked street" alliteration achieves a nice spondaic effect in L1Q1, to produce the sense of a street being "shocked." This is especially effective as it follows the initial spondee of "Right down." Wilbur is perhaps suggesting with the heavy "s" alliteration the weaving "s" pattern of a fire-truck in a hurry. Other alliterative combinations in this poem are "hats/hurl" in L3Q1, and "howl/hearing" in L1Q4. It is perhaps worthy to note the close association between the latter of the two combinations.

Just a word about the effect of some of the rimes in this poem. In the second quatrain action serves as a nice echo for traction, and in the fourth quatrain both the a rimes and the b rimes work nicely as echoes: the fire-truck is enshrined in the persona's mind, but does he admire fire? I think that he does, or that he at least has a deep respect for it, and I will attempt to justify this theory in the following paragraphs.

I believe that a true understanding of this poem lies in the ability to see the fire-truck as symbolizing a phoenix. But before I start into the poem, let me first point out a few things about the phoenix:

1. It is a fabulous bird connected with the worship of the sun especially in ancient Egypt and in classical antiquity.
2. It is large as an eagle, with brilliant scarlet and gold plumage and a melodious cry.
3. It is very long-lived; no ancient authority gives it a life span of less than five hundred years; some say it lives for 1,461 years; an extreme estimate is 97,200. The Egyptians associated the phoenix with intimations of immortality. (Along with #1 and #2 from Encyclopaedia Britannica).
4. The phoenix is, "in heraldry, a charge depicting a bird surrounded by flames." (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary).

In L1Q1, we find the first image that I think can be tied in with the phoenix image: the siren-blast. I see this as possibly referring to the "melodious cry" of the phoenix. Then in L3Q1, we find the fire-truck described as having the colors "redness" and "brass"--a direct parallel to the "brilliant scarlet and gold plumage" of the phoenix.

In L1Q3, a list of adjectives describing the fire-truck can also be used to describe a phoenix. A phoenix is definitely beautiful; he must be heavy, being the size of an eagle; his intimations of immortality would seem to suggest an unweariness; his melodious cry fits the "loud" description, and from the descriptions we have of the phoenix, he would definitely be a very "obvious thing."

The phrase "purged of nuance" in L2Q3 can possibly be seen as the rebirth by fire of the phoenix: the old phoenix is consumed by the fire, an ultimate purgation, to be replaced by a new born phoenix. But in this instance, the persona, rather than the fire-truck, has been purged. In the face of the bright, flaming energy of the fire-truck, the persona has lost all the variations of his being, the slate of his mind has been wiped clean, and he remains as a single flame of praise for his purger.

The phrase "All I was brooding upon has taken wing" takes on a double meaning in light of the phoenix image. The surface meaning is, of course, that seeing the fire-truck has caused the persona to forget about what he was brooding upon, but he is also "brooding upon" the fire-truck, and it has "taken wings" by being compared to a phoenix.

As the fire-truck "howls beyond hearing," the persona carries it into his mind (all the more possible now that his mind is "a blank"), and we finally have the persona actually make mention of the phoenix

comparison: "there to admire/ Your phoenix-red simplicity." As the persona enshrines the fire-truck in the fire of his mind, we can see the connection it has with the phoenix symbol in heraldry, of a charge depicting a bird surrounded by flames.

Another parallel between the fire-truck and the phoenix is that they both found their birth, their ability to exist, in fire. Had it not been for the old phoenix's funeral pyre, the phoenix would not have been born. In the same sense, had it not been for fire, the fire-truck would have never been invented. There would have been no need for it.

The splendid twist here is that this instrument for putting out fires is spoken of and described in either direct fire images, or in images closely related to fire. The phoenix with its association with sun worship, and its birth and death by fire, is a unique image. The final enshrinement of the fire-truck is a splendid twist of irony. The fire-truck, whose sole purpose is to extinguish fires, is enshrined in flames it cannot extinguish.

Now, for a word or two about the concept of thought being "degraded action." The persona has apparently been brooding upon somewhat less than happy thoughts when a fire-truck comes roaring past him in a blur of "sheer verb." He continues to watch it as it speeds down to a corner, shifts into gear, squalls around the corner, and "howls" out of sight. Every line is enjambed in the first two quatrains, one long sentence of fast-packed action ending with the exclamatory announcement that "thought is degraded action!"

The persona has good reason for saying this, for his thoughts have been brooding, and therefore not near as exciting as action. But there is truth in this statement apart from the persona's brooding thoughts.

Thoughts of action are always the first stage, the seed of action to come. It is in action only that they grow to maturity. It is therefore only logical that the thoughts are "degraded" in the sense of "lower in rank or merit." There are some who would argue that thought is higher in rank, but the persona would not be among their number. It is perhaps this love of action of his that makes the persona describe his hero, the fire-truck, in images of fire, for fire is pure action. One must extinguish it to make it do anything but act.

## PART II

### THE THIRST FOR MERE SURVIVAL

"The Undead" is in many ways very different from "A Fire-Truck." While both poems are very descriptive, in "The Undead," Wilbur moves beyond mere description to make a powerful social comment. While "A Fire-Truck" is filled with praise for the object of its description, the comments made in "The Undead" are negative, though tempered with sympathetic understanding. But the content is not the only thing that makes this poem different from "A Fire-Truck."

To the eye and ear, perhaps the greatest difference between the two poems is their structures. In "The Undead," Wilbur dispensed with conventional forms and composed the poem in eleven unrimed tetrastichs:

Even as children they were late sleepers,  
Preferring their dreams, even when quick with monsters,  
To the world with all its breakable toys,  
Its compacts with the dying;

From the stretched arms of withered trees  
They turned, fearing contagion of the mortal,  
And even under the plums of summer  
Drifted like winter moons.

Secret, unfriendly, pale, possessed  
Of the one wish, the thirst for mere survival,  
They came, as all extremists do  
In time, to a sort of grandeur:

Now, to their Balkan battlements  
Above the vulgar town of their first lives,  
They rise at the moon's rising, Strange  
That their utter self-concern

Should, in the end, have left them selfless:  
Mirrors fail to perceive them as they float

Through the great hall and up the staircase;  
Nor are the cobwebs broken,

Into the pallid night emerging,  
Wrapped in their flapping capes, routinely maddened  
By a wolf's cry, they stand for a moment  
Stoking the mind's eye

With lewd thoughts of the pressed flowers  
And bric-a-brac of rooms with something to lose,--  
Of love-dismembered dolls, and children  
Buried in quilted sleep.

Then they are off in a negative frenzy,  
Their black shapes cropped into sudden bats  
That swarm, burst, and are gone. Thinking  
Of a thrush cold in the leaves

Who has sung his few summers truly,  
Or an old scholar resting his eyes at last,  
We cannot be much impressed with vampires,  
Colorful though they are;

Nevertheless, their pain is real,  
And requires our pity. Think how sad it must be  
To thirst always for a scorned elixir,  
The salt quotidian blood

Which, if mistrusted, has no savor;  
To prey on life forever and not possess it,  
As rock-hollows, tide after tide,  
Glassily strand the sea.

Were it not for the typography of the stanzas, the poem would not appear so different to the eye, for there is, of course, an abundance of four-line stanzas in English verse. But the typography does indeed set the poem apart from other tetrastichs. Perhaps Wilbur uses this typography to call to mind the shape of a bat, which we shall see is one of the principal images of the poem.

Wilbur has chosen to write this poem in accentual meter. While the syllabic count of each line varies greatly, Wilbur holds to a rigid pattern of accents, varying from the pattern in only one line out of forty-four. The first and third lines of each stanza have four accents,

line two of each stanza has five, and the fourth line invariably has three. The only deviation from this pattern is L1T4, which has three rather than four accents. The syllabic count, as I have mentioned, varies from stanza to stanza, the first and third lines varying from eight to eleven syllables, the second line varying between nine and twelve, and the fourth containing anywhere from five to eight syllables.

This poem is similar in some ways to the accentual poems of Old English. The standard line of Old English verse contained four accents, as do two lines out of each of Wilbur's tetrastichs. While the second and fourth lines of course vary in this respect, it is a variance of only a single accent. An obvious dissimilarity regarding the accents is that the Old English poetic line divided its accents into two hemistichs of two stresses each, separated by an invariable medial caesura. Another difference is found in that Old English verse was generally stichic, rather than strophic.

But there is another strong similarity in this poem with Old English verse in its frequent use of alliterative stresses. The stressed syllables of Old English poems often alliterate, the alliteration tending to emphasize the stress. Wilbur utilized this same device in "The Undead." We find such initial alliterative stresses as "one wish," "Balkan battlements," "bric-a-brac," and "tide/tide." Other such cases are "strand/sea," "rise/rising," "fail/float," "black/bats" and "sung/summers." The "pale/possessed" combination of L1T3 is interesting in that while having "possessed" directly follow "pale" creates an alliterative effect, the accents of the two words do not alliterate. Wilbur also uses the alliterative stress device with words in which the initial syllables do not alliterate, as is seen in the combinations



Another example of this effective technique is found in L3T4. Wilbur has just told us of the peculiar activities of the undead, activities which include nighttime flights from Balkan battlements, when he suddenly seems to utter a one-word comment on these activities: "Strange." This effect occurs because it is capitalized, it is the last word of the line, and it follows the caesura created by the punctuation. Enjambment immediately moderates the effect of the word as the reader learns that "strange" is part of a comment dealing with another aspect of the undead, but there is that moment in which the word stands out as a single sentence and comment, completely independent of any other line.

We find this same technique functioning differently in other cases, serving to emphasize, rather than to connote second meanings. An example of this is L3T3, where we find the modification of an adverbial phrase postponed for a moment to give added emphasis to the verb. If the line read "as all extremists do in time," the statement would not be as strong. Postponing "in time" until the next line gives the phrase a deeper sense of finality, inevitability, and truth: "as all extremists do". The enjambment soon moderates this, but the effect remains. This is also true in the cases given above. The effect, though moderated by the enjambment, stays with the reader.

Wilbur foregoes the use of rime in this poem, another characteristic it shares with the accentual verse of Old English. The only rime in the entire poem is the internal rime of the sixth stanza:

Into the pallid night emerging,  
 Wrapped in their flapping capes, routinely maddened  
 By a wolf's cry, they stand for a moment  
 Stoking the mind's eye

The ear immediately picks up such an obvious, natural rime, especially as it occurs in the midst of an unriming poem. The interjection of a rime in the middle of an unriming poem causes the rime to ring out like the single stroke of a chime in contrast with the rest of the poem, which is a very pleasing effect indeed. But though such structural techniques are a splendid feature of this poem and further proof of Wilbur's fine craftsmanship, the true wealth of "The Undead" lies in its content.

As we saw in "A Fire-Truck," Wilbur has a remarkable talent for helping the reader picture in his mind the dramatic situation. While in "A Fire-Truck," both the persona and the reader stand "purged of nuance" in the face of the bright, positive energy of the picture, "The Undead" pulls the reader into a world of mysterious darkness and evil, a world peopled with the undead. Wilbur's words evoke in the reader's mind a frightening nighttime vision of a maleficent castle from which bats rise, while nearby wolves howl to the cold winter moon above. It is a chilling picture masterfully created by a master of words.

Though the principal figures in this poem are vampires, Wilbur makes us aware of this only by stages, the first stage being the title. The title is, indeed, a splendid way to begin this poem, as it prepares the reader immediately for a poem dealing with the supernatural. But Wilbur only gives us one clue at a time as to what the undead are, leading us on from stanza to stanza, until by the time he finally names them in the ninth stanza, we are already certain that they are vampires, especially when we find them becoming bats in the eighth stanza. This technique of only disclosing a bit of information at a time keeps the

interest level very high, and, consequently, makes the poem extremely readable.

While the poem can of course be read on the surface level as merely being about vampires, Wilbur is clearly saying much more than that. The vampire is being used to symbolize a certain type of person whom Wilbur views as "undead." The vampire, described in folklore as a reanimated corpse that sucks the blood of the living, is therefore a very striking and accurate image. Wilbur develops this image by keeping always to the vampire motif, complete with "Balkan battlements" and transformations into bats. But the reader should remember that this is all to symbolize very ordinary, real human beings whom we see everyday, whether we are in the Balkans or our local grocery store. These people are from every race and nation, who have one thing in common: they have missed out on life in their selfish desire to live.

Wilbur introduces us to this concept in the very first stanza, when he tells us that they had this desire "even as children." The qualifier "even" is used here to point out the extremity of their desire. Childhood is the most innocent stage in life, the stage in which one has little concept of the problems of life and the inevitability of death. Wilbur puts forth this notion in his poem "The Pardon," in which he relates:

Well, I was ten and very much afraid,  
In my kind world the dead were out of range.

Therefore, these people must have a very strong aversion to death indeed, if it was already causing them to shun life in their innocent years. Referring to them as "late sleepers" is a clever way of tying the life of the vampire to the deeds of ordinary men; it makes the vampire's

daily repose from sunrise to sunset seem commonplace, while emphasizing the fact that the vampire is merely being used as a symbol. This is also the first clue as to the identity of the undead,

The unreality of their desire of an eternal life is illustrated in this stanza by referring to it as merely a dream. They prefer their dreams of a life where nothing dies or changes, even though these dreams may be "quick with monsters". "Quick" is an ironic word to use here, for Wilbur is using it in its archaic sense of "alive." Living monsters in the unreal world of their dreams can be tolerated, for at least the monsters stay the same and never die, and therefore never remind them of death. But they find the true life of the real world intolerable, for it never lasts. It is a world of "breakable toys," where all is vulnerable to death and decay. It is a world of "compacts with the dying" in that any agreements or associations we have in this world are with the dying, for every living thing in the world is dying, every day of its life putting it one day closer to its ultimate death. The undead greatly prefer their dreams of the quick to our world of the dead.

In the second stanza we find that they avoid all forms of life, from humans to plant life. They turn from "the stretched arms of withered trees," for they are afraid that the mortality that caused the trees to grow old and wither is contagious. "Stretched arms" is a splendid description, as it tends to lend humanity to the trees as they reach out to the undead entreating them to accept life. The undead also turn from "the plums of summer," for even though during the summer the plums are youthful and have not withered like the old trees, the undead know that the withering will come. The plums, too, are infected

with mortality, so the undead drift from them "like winter moons." This is a nice contrast between the warm, living plums of the summer and the cold, wintry undead.

In the third stanza we find what type of people the undead have become through avoiding life: "secret, unfriendly, pale". This last adjective is ironic in that these who so want to prolong life have unhealthy, lifeless countenances. Wilbur tells us that they are "possessed" of only one wish: "the thirst for mere survival". "Mere" is the key word here, for it notes that survival without the essence of life is, in itself, nothing. The undead want only to survive--not to live. Wilbur observes that they are extremists in their fierce possession of this wish, and he makes an interesting comment about extremists:

They came, as all extremists do  
In time, to a sort of grandeur;

Extremists, in their acts and eccentricities, call attention to themselves; we cannot help but notice them. They therefore often become the central figures of history and can be either good or bad, a Hitler or a Joan of Arc. In this sense, grandeur therefore means "eminence," or, in a more general sense, "large" or "great," two definitions of its Latin root "grandis." Their extremity makes them stand out and seem rather larger than life. But the colon at the end of the stanza tells the reader that the following lines will describe their grandeur, and we find that it is also being used to mean "splendor" or "magnificence."

In this stanza, Wilbur introduces more clues as to the identity of the undead. While "Balkan battlements" serves to describe what form

their grandeur takes, it also hints at the identity of the undead, for it calls to mind the vampire's ties with Balkan folklore. The "vulgar town" serves as a nice contrast to the grandeur of the "Balkan battlements," and it emphasizes the vampire's separation from the world. In their "first lives"--the only time in which they were actually living--they were among the common people and experiencing their common joys and sorrows. But now they prefer the isolation of their battlements "to the world with all its breakable toys."

Our second clue in this stanza regarding the identity of the undead is that "they rise at the moon's rising," a definite characteristic of the vampire. At this point, Wilbur states in a wonderfully phrased sentence the theme of the poem and the ironic paradox of "the thirst for mere survival": "their utter self-concern" has "left them selfless." Their selfish desire to live eternally in a world where nothing perishes has left them "secret, unfriendly, pale," and, ultimately, "selfless." Ironically, in gaining "mere survival," their selves have died. The one thing that serves as the greatest distinction between the living and the dead has perished in the undead. They remain as mere corpses fooled into believing they have gained eternal life.

In his typically clever fashion, Wilbur ties in the poem's theme with a further characteristic of the vampire: "mirrors fail to perceive them." It becomes all the more obvious what a splendid symbol the vampire is for the person whose self-concern has left him selfless. The undead have not even enough substance to be reflected by a mirror or break cobwebs.

Wilbur carries the vampire image further in the sixth stanza when the undead, "wrapped in their flapping capes," emerge into the "pallid

night." The description of the night as "pallid" further emphasizes the lifeless existence of the undead; even their environment, the very sky through which they fly, is lifeless. In telling us that they are "routinely maddened by a wolf's cry," Wilbur is possibly saying one of two things. Perhaps the undead are only going through the motions of being maddened, merely following the acquired routine of an emotion they are supposed to feel, or perhaps the routine reaction is sincere. We know that the one thing the undead find maddening is the thought of a world with "breakable toys," life as we know it. Therefore, perhaps the wolf's cry, coming as it does from a living animal, reminds them of life, a remembrance which they would no doubt find "maddening."

As if the wolf's cry were not enough fuel for their madness, they stand for a moment stoking the fire of the "mind's eye" to further madness. The fuel for this madness are thoughts of the world of the living, and they are perhaps "stoking the mind's eye" with such thoughts to remind them to stay away from it. Wilbur calls their thoughts "lewd," and he is probably using it in its obsolete sense of "wicked," for they hate and are repulsed by their memories of life.

In this seventh stanza, Wilbur paints a beautiful picture of some of the charming aspects of life that we hold most dear, aspects for which we feel life is worth living. Wilbur uses this stanza to emphasize the extremity of the undead's perversion--they are repulsed by the very things that we find beautiful. The stanza reminds me very much of the last stanza of Yeats' "The Stolen Child":

Away with us he's going,  
The solemn-eyed:  
He'll hear no more the lowing  
Of the calves on the warm hillside  
Or the kettle on the hob  
Sing peace into his breast,

Or see the brown mice bob  
 Round and round the oatmeal-chest,  
For he comes, the human child,  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand,

The undead, like the stolen child, cannot understand this world in which lives are an odd mixture of joy and pain, a world full of weeping and "compacts with the dying," but also containing sleeping children, lowing calves, and love-worn dolls.

Wilbur qualifies each of the aspects of life given in this stanza with the reasons why the undead are repulsed by them. Though "pressed flowers" call to our minds a flower saved from a cherished evening, the undead view them as they view the withered trees of the second stanza: they are merely further examples of the withering effect that time and death have on living things. While the "bric-a-brac of rooms" remind us of our warm, comfortable homes, the undead see them as "rooms with something to lose," simply more things that can be lost and further proof that we cannot hold on to things forever. We view with tenderness "love-dismembered dolls," seeing them as evidence of a child's love and constancy. But to the undead they are the "breakable toys" referred to in the first stanza, further examples of the vulnerability of the things of this world. Perhaps they are also reminded of the ravaging aspect of love, recalling that while love can be a very splendid thing, it can also destroy one and rend a heart in two. Even in its more positive moments, it leaves one vulnerable, and the undead despise vulnerability. The stanza closes with the beautiful image of "children buried in quilted sleep." While we are filled with peace and love when beholding a sleeping child, the undead view them as "buried" in sleep, reminding them of the death they so dread.



After "stoking the mind's eye" with these thoughts that they find so repulsive, "they are off in a negative frenzy," the word "negative" being used to indicate their repulsion to these thoughts, while "frenzy" shows their urgency to flee from such thoughts. Then Wilbur gives us the final, completely revealing clue as to the identity of the undead: "Their black shapes cropped into sudden bats." If we had any doubt before now that the undead are vampires, we can be certain now, for only one class in the family of the undead metamorphose into bats.

Having described the vampires in the first eight stanzas, Wilbur proceeds to end the poem with his comment on such an attitude toward life. Finally identifying the undead by name, he points out that in comparison to a "thrush cold in the leaves who has sung his few summers truly, or an old scholar resting his eyes at last," the vampires are hardly impressive. Wilbur is no doubt referring to the thrush in Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," the persona of which has an attitude similar to that of the undead:

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
 The Century's corpse outleant,  
 His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
 The wind his death-lament.  
 The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
 Was shrunken hard and dry,  
 And every spirit upon earth  
 Seemed fervourless as I.

Hardly a cheery view of life; the persona would no doubt share the undead's opinion of withered trees and pressed flowers. But in this same dreary world, the persona hears one who remains cheerful:

At once a voice arose among  
 The bleak twigs overhead  
 In a full-hearted evensong  
 Of joy illimited;  
 An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
 In blast-beruffled plume,

Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

Such a thrush, Wilbur points out, is far more impressive than one who has not the courage to face life. The thrush knows of the pains of life; they have given him a "blast-beruffled plume" and time has made him "frail, gaunt, and small." Yet he knows that the joys of life have been worth the pains. He knows that life contains no joy unless it is truly lived, so he has "sung his few summers truly," and will continue doing so until his songs are stopped by death.

Such is also the case with the old scholar. His studies have no doubt shown him that trees do indeed wither and toys do happen to break. His studies have been accompanied with the weariness that comes from arduous studying and which surely made him look at times with some eagerness toward the day when he would finally be "resting his eyes at last." But from his studies he has also gained the wisdom that he shares with the thrush. The joy of his studies has been worth the accompanying pain, and he can rest his eyes at last with the knowledge that his happiness came from living life to the fullest in "a world more full of weeping" than the undead can understand.

Wilbur speaks the truth in saying that "we cannot be much impressed with vampires" when we compare them to such cases as the thrush and the old scholar, who appear somewhat as martyrs in the poem. We tend to view martyrs as heroes, for we see in them a bravery we do not ourselves generally possess. We know that it is our tendency to either run from the problems of life like the undead, or to become depressed by our circumstances and go around bemoaning our fate. "We cannot be much impressed with vampires," for they are too much like us.

Wilbur tempers his criticism of the undead by pointing out that "their pain is real, and requires our pity." Suddenly the undead are no longer malevolent beings for whom we can feel no pity, No matter what their sins are, they hurt, "their pain is real," and we cannot help but pity them. The reader is moved from an attitude of judgment to sympathetic understanding. We realize the pathos of thirsting always for a "scorned elixir." The vampire motif works very nicely here. For the vampires, blood is indeed an elixir, a substance which will prolong their lives indefinitely. As long as they keep a fairly regular diet of blood, they will remain young and never die.

But at the same time, Wilbur is using "elixir" to symbolize life. The undead want the life-giving blood, while at the same time scorning the life it gives. They therefore "thirst always for a scorned elixir, the salt quotidian blood which, if mistrusted, has no savor." They thirst for the daily life of humans, but they do not trust it, so it therefore "has no savor." As was told to us in the third stanza, there's is a "thirst for mere survival." They do not realize that survival is nothing unless the life it gives is lived, that if you constantly mistrust life, fearing its "breakable toys" and "compacts with the dying," you cannot enjoy it, and it is therefore not worth having. The "salt quotidian blood" has savor only if it is quaffed in full, with a full acceptance of all the aftereffects it brings.

Until the undead realize this, they will "prey on life forever and not possess it." They will thirst always for the "scorned elixir," yet will never really have it due to their scorn of it. They will prey on it in that they will obtain from life the element that prolongs their existence, their "mere survival," but they will have missed the

true essence of it. They will be "as rock-hollows" that "tide after tide, glassily strand the sea." The rock-hollows, though in continual contact with the sea, never possess it, are never part of it, as the undead strand the sea of life. They remain always on the edge of it, looking out on life "glassily" in their lifelessness, being eroded by life as the sea erodes the rocks, and therefore becoming more and more like hollow rocks, inanimate objects with no inner substance.



