

CLIVE WILMER AMONG THE BUILDERS

Clive Wilmer, *New and Collected Poems*. Carcanet Press, 2012.

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A striking development which marks the latter half of this large book sets its writer apart from poets anywhere now active in English. Most of the work that makes this evident this was either first collected in the extant volume *The Mystery of Things* (2006) or arranged here as books for the first time: *King Alfred's Book & Other Poems* (1992-2000) and *Report from Nowhere & Other Poems* (2006-2011). Although a key supposition for this development remains unstated in both Wilmer's poetry and criticism, it nearly breaks surface in the poems that I shall deal with here: namely, that architecture, rather than music or sculpture, now provides the foundational analogy, among the arts, for poetry. While one epigraph to this *New and Collected* invokes Ruskin on building, a few of these poems go Ruskin one better, in adopting a practice akin to Pound's central innovation as Hugh Kenner mapped it, of replicating in Bucky-Fuller fashion consistent constructive ratios across a range of scales. (Probably Ruskin on Gothic anticipated what Kenner traces between the units in Pound's *Cantos* and in Fuller's geodesics: that certain ornament in the cathedrals is to their construction what small unit is to large in *The Cantos* and a Bucky-dome.) The sequence climaxing with "The Holy of Holies" will demonstrate how most of this comes to bear, in a poetry which, like Gunn's, has continued to draw on the traditional braveries. Thom Gunn valued Wilmer's work for its absence of both attitudinizing and lies. Almost certainly he also would have esteemed its chosen Modernist means for their ability to touch on mystical-erotic analogies.

Wilmer was born in 1945 in Harrogate, Yorkshire (graduate of Kings College, Cambridge, a one-time freelance writer and currently a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, the younger brother of the jazz writer and photographer Val Wilmer, and Master of the English utopian charity founded by Ruskin in 1871, the Guild of St. George). He has paid close attention to both Ruskin and Morris, but also Pound, Gaudier-Brezska, Gunn, and Davie, among others. His recent erotic-spiritual writing, however, has as its most singular feature an emerging architectural intention. The framing of his *New and Collected* supports that claim: first "The Exile," moved by Wilmer into lead position, and the final poem, a translation of Mandelstam's "Hagia Sophia." The first, resembling Gunn's early astringent allegories, imagines a city and its citadel cycling rapidly from construction

to decay, scoping a lifetime of recognitions; it anticipates such later poems as “Antiphonal Sonnets,” “The Law of the House,” and “Civitas.” The version of Mandelstam posts “A temple bathing in the world” at the limit of the recent work, which includes a copious selection of East European poetry in translation.

For my purposes, “Il Palazzo della Ragione” (in Padova: a poem collected in 1982) ushers in this development. A gentleman sculpted in relief high on the communal Hall of Justice (“Smiling as if at me, to bid me welcome”), whose vast ceiling coordinates the zodiac with human life, gently puts in the spur. “It seems he has a graciousness / Beyond our time to emulate. . . . / That smile across the ages is intent / On courtesy. And none the less, / I suffer it as though it were contempt.” The cant epitomes of Modernism, that it arrogantly upbraids the present with the past, would ignore just such hints toward building good governance and social justice in the here and now. Ruskin, too, felt that spur go in deeply, and one part of Pound’s work, cant epitomes to one side, is one of its offshoots. A parallel encounter crops up two pages later, this time with Gunn’s Romantic sensing both enhanced and liminal. “Beyond Recall (*for Thom Gunn*)” honors the solitary who shoots for the Keatsian asymptote, the inexpressible limit, in a clouded and pungent bar. “Light / on crude gems that define a haze. / They, once possessed—though precious / beyond recall—remain his / alone / who inclining toward the past / hears nightingales in the dark, yet never can / transcribe their fluid melodies.” This span of attention, under the weight of rebirth recalled and the allure of rebirth experienced without recall—Renaissance vis-à-vis newly cleansed doors of perception—at the very least has kept Wilmer at work on Victorian-Left and 20th-century writing in the wake of the Modernist push.

Wilmer describes his recent motives in a long interview from 2006, “The Divine Eros,” given to American poet Peter Campion (reprinted in *NDR* 24, 2007). There Wilmer notes, first, that while the sexual experience he explores in recent work is not to be confused with mystical union, nonetheless through it an expansive devotional understanding has become his primary concern. (As we shall see, a bit from *The Cloud of Unknowing* gets stitched into some of the sexual punning.) Second, this devotional aim places him in a line that includes not only Donne and the Song of Songs but also such non-devotional transgressives as Baudelaire. What he chiefly values in this hybrid, however, is the magnifying power of *analogy* within it, which tracks the paradox of the creative void (running from Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite through Meister Eckhart to the Renaissance Neo-platonists). In particular, Wilmer cherishes Shakespeare’s sexual puns on naught, naughty,

and nothing (Hamlet's "And all for nothing")—which submit this comprehensive analogy to brisk cross-lighting. Wilmer has written elsewhere of Thom Gunn's abundant recourse to Shakespeare in developing a flexibly mature identity¹; likewise, Shakespeare has become a grandfather to Wilmer's later style. None the less, the analogy to which he holds does not stop with the sexual-transcendent equation—in the 14th-century *ghostliness* that he and his lover in "Stigmata" prefer to the 20th-century cant-term *spirituality*—for that same analogy also brings in the impersonal historical world, resistant to subjective manipulation. He names poets from the two generations since the late 1920s and early 1940s, both English and American, who seem to him either to anticipate or share this broadly sketched practice, which he calls Neo-modernist. Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, Edgar Bowers, and Donald Davie anticipate it; contemporary examples would be B. H. Fairchild, Gabriel Levin, myself, Jim Powell, and Stephen Romer. In ascribing to them a religious *view* that unites these things with "a willingness to combine the fragmentary, ideogrammic, juxtapository, elliptical, discontinuous aspects of Modernism with rational syntax, abstract language, . . . and also [as in Eliot's *Quartets*] to use both standard meter and free verse in the same poem," he describes his own later style.

His further comments help account for his brief on Neo-modernist practice. A quartet of Modernists—Bunting, Jones, Pound, and Eliot—"by loosening up analogy, removing the hierarchy of tenor and vehicle," brought on an historical shift, not of the Linguistic Turn but of what one might call *the correlative comparison* (probably it well suits Pound and Bucky's flexible scaling of units, although I must couch this hunch in embryo-form). If the vehicle can sing tenor, so to speak, then significations turn reciprocal. That is, anything can carry almost anything else without signaling that it is about to do so; and likewise, the ordinary distinctions of inner from outer, and of personal from collective/objective, get ventilated, or at least are no longer subject to customs inspection. Wilmer's Neo-modernism would respond further to boundaries opened in the first half of the 20th century, from social catastrophe to depth ecology, anthropology, physics, and psychology. Pound might construe Neo-modernism as a "dilutation." Wilmer, emboldened by Davie and Gunn, banks on it as a hybrid strengthener that loops backward to raid the terrain abandoned by Modernism, in a tactical *reculement* (as in *Il faut reculer pour mieux sauter*). His allies are rebounders who cross-breed strains of Modernist practice with things that Modernism set aside, though not always: Wilmer's other epigraph draws on the urgent homage to Renaissance lyric in the *Pisan Cantos*: "What thou lov'st well shall not be ref't from thee." Which sets the bar high: one falls back only when the stakes, and

one's kidney, warrant a powerhouse raid.

Any such reachings-back behind Modernism stem from the rupture—David Jones called it “The Break”—that induced it. The Europe of Pound's *Cantos I-XXX* is mortuary, both in the renaissance and World War I, its Venice an uncanny museum, a stone forest alive with growth. Guy Davenport's summary of Ruskin's outlook and wide influence—though Ruskin now goes unread—comes down to his feeling for the fragility of civilization. Tyre, Venice, London—*island capitals of empires that grew over millennia but could melt in a minute: the *vanitas* theme on a broad scale, underwritten by the then-new geology and archaeology. Which all turn out to have scored mere prelude to a global prospect of evanescence, in our own up-the-smokestack scenario of *Planetentblitz* at which our oligarchs, like the freaks in George Grosz and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, brazenly grin. *Fors Clavigera* was the first manifesto—and the last innocent one—toward the building of a new guild-socialist order based on meaningful work and benign government: not Fourier's squadrons-of-happiness schemes by a long shot. (The charity now headed by Wilmer, tiny lozenge in the maw of Blair-Bush civics, is one of its vestiges; the fermenting discourse on the international Left about social-democratic initiatives is another. Tolstoy and Gandhi cited Ruskin.) Davenport evokes the scrim behind Ruskin's workshop: “Even Macaulay imagined a future New Zealand poet gazing on the ruins of London Bridge.... The past seemed to be not one creation, as in Genesis, but many, each canceled by awesome catastrophes followed by a new beginning.”²² The Christian dead returning from Jerusalem for a collective séance with Jung during his *Red Book* years, the years of the two Marnes and Ypres, had their forerunners in the foreboding which stalks the architecture, painting, and economics in Ruskin's collected works, and which prodded him to cobble up a better social and artistic ethos before it was too late.*

And now that it is too late, how not define that fact, as it begins to register fully, as the dire mold of an aesthetic? But which one, or ones? Among Wilmer's mentors, the reply comes down to the various ways in which one can retain measure and artistic aim in spite of massive abdications of collective responsibility. For Pound, it was “the Mediterranean sanity,” whereas for Davie, disillusioned by Pound's handling of history, it was a tetchy Dissenter's Tory probity; yet for both men the working terms were similar, in treating language as a resistant medium that confronts the artist with unbudgeable matters, not the smoke machines of autotelic, undecidable, and harmonically associated factors. (Those who grew up at mid-century have seen the snake bite its tail in this regard, with the associational drifts of *Symboliste* aesthetics from the 1890s partly echoed by the skeptical

rhapsodies of theoretic textual interpreters in the late 20th century.) Wilmer records a lineage, from Pound to Davie, for the same assessment of how the intractable linguistic medium recommends that a poet detour around Eliot's *Symboliste* poetics (or Ashbery's) to a different sister art:

Pound provided Davie with a lifeline: here was a radical innovator for whom (as Théophile Gautier said of himself) "le monde visible existe." Gautier is an important figure here. As is clear from *Articulate Energy* [and the work collected later by Wilmer in *Modernist Essays*], the young Davie was preoccupied with Walter Pater's notion that "all art aspires toward the condition of music" [construed chiefly as ideas linked not through syntax but rhythmic recurrence]. Davie arrived at his understanding of this through his study of Eliot's poetry. It fascinated him but he was never happy with it; he disliked its self-sufficiency, looking instead for a poetry that was disciplined by the facts of the real world.... Pound, as Davie read him, had come to a similar view in the years of his friendship with Eliot, and he seemed to have done so through Gautier's use of an analogy not with music but with sculpture.... The poem was no longer a fluid reverie of associating symbols. Its true concern was with irreducible fact.³

However, that assessment when pursued further leads past music or sculpture, as the intramural analogy, to architecture. As one readily sees, this turn is not about something new. Taking the long view, the massive caesura marked by Whitman's best work, paralleled in French by Saint-John Perse, has led many to assume some kind of progress in poetry which has never existed. (Oscar Milosz heard in Whitman both the Homeric and biblical pulses along with something yet to come.) Thus perhaps the development most worth observing—not the progress—leaves the rhythms of both ideas and verse movement to one side. Both Pound's recourse to Gautier and then Davie's snap back from self-contained associations of idea and rhythm toward obdurately given terms—not with respect to "free" versus some constraining opposite, but with respect to horizon: does the world stop at the boundary of my medium, or does it cross over into it? And how far? (on one side Ponge buries himself in his meadow, or *prés*, made of homophones—"Pré, paré, pré, près prêt"—while on the other Winters thunders that "red" is not a particular, because "red," too, is an abstraction). The kinds of building undertaken on those separate grounds—with the matter of progress out of view—prove to be quite different constructions.

Both of Wilmer's epigraphs reach back in tactical *reculement* without assuming either progress or regression. From Pound's Canto LXXXI, written in the DTC cage at Pisa, "What thou lov'st" enters among allusions to Jonson, Waller, and Chaucer, and to settings by Lawes, Jenkins, and Dowland, and follows his parenthetical "to break the pentameter, that was the first

heave,” making his pastiche-throwback to court-lyric style a justification for having innovated during his embattled present. Inalienable residues consoled Pound, to be sure, but his point also was to lodge them in a building-onward. Which in our terms opens the way for Neo-modernist loop-stitches backward, when such reach be warranted. The epigraph from Ruskin’s early *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849: Chapter VI, “The Lamp of Memory”) begins with a yearning hypothetical: “When we build, let us think that we build for ever.” Just what is at stake with that urging? Wilmer’s first book *The Dwelling-Place* bore a similar epigraph from Ruskin’s *Val d’Arno*: “A man’s religion is the form of mental rest, or dwelling-place, which, partly, his fathers have gained or built for him, and partly, by due reverence to former custom, he has built for himself. . . .” Given Wilmer’s politics, none of these passages reinstates the stodgy or cuddly; only in retrospect do they support the gradual push made by Wilmer at his heritage, both playfully and starkly, to move it, as Gunn had moved his, toward a fusion poetics.

The Ruskin epigraph in the *New and Collected* is followed in *Seven Lamps* by an emphasis on texture in stone work, “in points of shade rather than in purity of outline,” whose ultimate inheritors, beyond the Gothic which Ruskin revived, are both Gaudí and Frank Gehry. The earlier epigraph from Ruskin indicates the generational task of building, which bridges *them* and *then* with *me* and *now* in a continuing life—and with it a just social life—that demands an art strong enough to sustain such paradoxical framing. That paradox lets one build while one is built upon. Something of it shows in the cover photograph by Mat Collishaw on this *New and Collected: Insecticide 24*, 2008, which splays several moths’ pied wings around the dusty smear of their bodies mashed under glass. In context, this ghostly-ghostly boutonnière puts Lear’s *mystery of things* and all its heartache on view, in Cuban colors winnowed coldly by fate—that is, *things mysteriously* go past one’s devotions into a revelatory mash-up, all the while an uncanny gaiety persists. Taken all in in all, the cover and the epigraphs turn points of shade into a buzz of tensions. *Building* already acquires a charged aura, in which Pound and Ruskin’s words hold Modernism in a complex stance toward its resisted Romantic background.

The way in which Wilmer holds Modernism in that stance has to do with the whole progression of “loosened analogies” among the arts, which braid and then throw a rope bridge across the Romantic-Modernist chasm. Architecture now inherits—for now. Wilmer like Davie (on *Symbolisme* and Eliot) argues (reading Winters, Gunn, Davie, and even, in part, Bunting) that neither music (in *Symbolisme*) nor sculpture (in Pound and Gaudier’s Modernism) continues to provide a root analogy for poetry among the sister

arts. With Davie as foregoer here, Wilmer all but names the new master analogy, which fluidly houses poetry while leaving no metaphors or redolent symbols for it standing, only analogues both inherited and on-the-move for each inheritor.

And movement becomes a main actor. The chief poems in the last two books collected here drop their readers into a swiftly glancing field of columns, passages, and enclosures that evoke each other while leaving their shared basis afloat. The invitation is to ride an open analogy, almost bodily, as it opens out. With definite design yet brisk whirl, an emergent form-sense, erotic and architectural, sweeps one in. The following sequence of poems shows how one is invited into this house-with-many-rooms, at first in a ludic way via a moonstruck *écrit*, “Bottom’s Dream:”

I was a weaver, and I wove
 The moody fabric of my dream.
 By day I laboured at the loom
 And glimpsed the image of a love
 I now know bottomless.

* * *

I snorted at the wandering moon
 In terror of the mystery,
 Which seemed quite bottomless,

And out of that she spoke, who had
 No voice, although she stirred my sense,
 Who touched me, though she had no hands,
 And led me where you cannot lead,
 Since it is bottomless.

The next two poems, “Dog Rose in June” and “Wonderwoman,” develop both the animal and blossom motifs in “Bottom’s Dream” (and allude to a nearby sequence, “The Language of Flowers” in *Report from Nowhere*, where the lover also evokes the Dog Rose). “Pink petals flare in the hedge... / Gently I splay the petals, bend and sniff... / Such heat this evening, come away from the path.” And then: “I felt the discourtesy / Of not rising to greet her. Nonetheless, / She gathered me up, bore me almost, carried me away. / What could I do?... / Not quite believing I was not a pig, / And yet knowing myself, inside myself, / Moved to my best of inwardness.” With the opposites now met, analogy can romp the span of English lyric:

Greensleeves

O my love is like an
Out-of-tune ice-cream van.

Tone then shifts markedly, the slopes of analogy growing slippery in the masterful “The Ruin,” where each unit scales a single, developing, multi-stage analogy outward and down—from an arch, through a proposition about framing and scaling, through an icon, through a Shoah grave, through the poems exhumed from it, to the startling final term. This cascade of analogically framed and scaled elements starts in a fragmentary way, then tightens around syntactic handholds that climax in the deceptively logical (quite analogical) “So:”

Cattle browse in the meadow the sprung arch,
shot of its tracery, frames

Form looking out of ruin, a different view
shaped by the form’s persistence

Miracle,

no other word for it, the enduring face
of Andrei Rublyov’s *Saviour*, gazing out
from what, after several centuries as a doorstep,
the context gone, is plainly still a board:
not Christ the judge, this one—a hurt survivor
with knowledge it is hard to look away from
of what is suffered here

And come again

as Radnóti’s last poems from the dark
and warmth of a mass grave, which they had shared
with swathes of greatcoat and corrupting flesh,
till brought to light

So the old bagwoman,
raddled, incontinent, hoists her reeking skirts
and, her lips pursed for crooning, rasps aloud:
Paradise, boys, come on, you can have it now.

Centuries as a doorstep: this threshold—wearing the Redeemer’s face—opens onto the mass grave (from which an anti-fascist’s great poems return to life) then onto a crotch *paradisum* (paradise or walled garden: like Bottom’s wood) offered by a blatant pauper (her impact like Baubo’s, the goddess-whore of childbirth mysteries). Whatever is birthed here jingles our bells about “Bottom’s Dream” and other poems in the neighborhood. Traumatized vestiges, apocalypse assured but assessment still groping, blank-

verse conventions deployed across unpunctuated section-breaks in free-verse paragraphing: while registering the poem's analogues, one is pulled in every direction. The keenly sensual darkness in Miklós Radnóti (the translated Eastern European best represented in this collection, along with György Petri, in versions by Wilmer and George Gömöri among others) comes to many kinds of life. More: the shock precipitated through that blown-out arch slides two major artists, the recovered Russian Orthodox Rublyov and exhumed Jewish anti-fascist Radnóti, down the poem's chute as "boys" toward a rutting All-mother: as Bottom's garden goes, it becomes our own day's turf, instanter. And how does the next poem, "*Much Ado about Nothing*," begin?—"signifying / a lot of fuss about fucking... / calling to mind / Courbet's *L'Origine de l'univers*" (a close-in view of crotch and vulva). The trove of Shakespeare's riffs on the matter furnish the poem—"in it thou art my all // and all for nothing. / For nothing doing. Since nothing / shall come of nothing"—which ends with a rope-bridge between Wallace Stevens and a quotation from the fourteenth-century treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "if this be nothing / that is not there; / and the Nothing that is / our inner man clepeth All."

On that turn of wit the pivot swings into:

The Holy of Holies

then broke in and found nothing.

She took me by the hand. A desolate place,
A place of stones, being unmade and made:
dark gashes in the earth with, all about,
stagnant pools, so churned up the terrain;
and standing alone, a stark new office-block,
half-built and bare, its concrete white in the moon.

From destruction we may draw consolation:
that there's no escape from fate,
not for great works or even holy places.
Nevertheless, that so ravishing a building,
its materials alone—marble and cedarwood—
so sumptuous, the stone so smoothly cut
so closely joined

Think of that
and thinking of the place, how deep inside, there
in the Holy of Holies,
you can lose what you are,
desire to, fear to

As I Flavius,
 a soldier of fortune, not myself a Roman,
 in this epoch since the fall,
 trafficked with a lithe avatar of the goddess
 Astarte, Aphrodite, whatever name,
 in the region of King's Cross.
 She it was
 who led me through that place to the tall block
 as yet unfinished, so that it seemed a ruin

the sanctum, the broken chancel, the lopped shaft
 holier than it would have been
 intact

She presents herself naked to Flavius Josephus—here both Josephus and a tenant of provincial Britain, at King's Cross in the moonlit 21st—the Hebrew commander who migrated into favor with Titus and witnessed the Jewish War of 70 A.D. from the Roman side. The historical Josephus turned propagandist for the Flavian emperors, but in Wilmer's poem he is about higher business: "I ran my fingertips along her mouth, caressed / her nipples, the dome of her belly, the dark fuzz: / I thought and measured, seeking / the precise gentleness to weigh the value."

The next verse paragraph consists of three words: "These two together." Those two of course are the goddess and Josephus, but also Britain now and Britain/Rome/Jerusalem then; apocalypse now and apocalypse then; and the divine presence now with the divine presence then, morphed by catastrophe into, not a *mysterium absconditus*, but a mystery fleshly and present. The wealth of crossings in this built place, including free-verse and blank-verse conventions, end in a summit king's-cross move: the break-in moment at the end point, unpunctuated, employs the Shakespearean pun one more time—"then broke in and found nothing"—while also conflating Josephus with the Roman commander Pompey, whose conquest of Jerusalem in 63 A. D. was marked by his violation of the Holy of Holies, an abomination which helped kindle the uprising in 66, leading to the eventual destruction under Titus in 70. Pompey, however, had touched *nothing*, leaving it inviolate in his violation. The tensile delicacy in this construction supports the poem's several-voiced progression unobtrusively. Pompey-Flavius's own voice comes to the point of wonderboy with wonderwoman, nose to crotch, "seeking / the precise gentleness to weigh the value." However, in the second half the voice comes from a narrator who looks back on Josephus. There-with the sacred *cella*'s character also changes with it, both built space and

vulva (“In it stood nothing whatever”). What Jerusalem had made invisible by decree, erotic heat now transfers invisibly between sex and spirit. The sill-leaner in “Wonderwoman” looks in again, along with a silent conflation of the narrator, Flavius Josephus, and Pompey, holy penetrators all, in one actor:

The torches carved a space out of the darkness,
 a recess of twenty cubits, until then
 screened by a veil and unapproachable,
 inviolable, invisible to all.
 In it stood nothing whatever, it was called
 the Holy of Holies

lose what you are
 fear desire

dark
 made darker still by the white ray:
 she turned away from me, as if to bow
 to the moon’s face, but leaned on the rough sill,
 so that her breasts hung softly in my hands

then the flames flared and leapt,
 I pushed lightly and the entrance gave

Among the next half dozen poems, which extend these analogies in the same revolving, glancing way, into building their theme onward, “The Architect at his Mountain Villa” writes a sexy-mystical coda to this stretch of the recent work. “All I can do is take you to the edge / And throw a belvedere / Out on the void, fenced in with cabled steel, / So there is nothing which you need to fear— / As fear you will, / Like somebody marooned on a rock ledge.” The reassurance then comes: “This is what builders do,” or at least do now.

“The Falls,” the other major sequence in this book, presages the melting of modes in the poems I have just described. Twice one is precipitated from a tight weave of seven alternating pentameter and trimeter unrhymed couplets into a free-verse cascade of internally stepped lines. Twice a Niagara judders down smoothly, then explodes in aspiring spume, repeating the Modernist trajectory into a limit grasp of process. But the aim is also to get something back from pre-Modernist means, in *reculement*, while still acknowledging that rendering the pour of phenomena intelligible remains—through a paraphrase of Heraclitus—an ever-receding goal, but also law: anti-structure as *the* structure. This poem consciously pays homage to

Gunn's "The Geysers," where consistently rhymed pentameter couplets gradually proceed from normal internal caesuras to fluidly stepped-down lines—a strategy for skirting dissolution while not yielding to it. Here at Wilmer's Niagara, situated precisely on the rock-ledge belvedere of his later mountain architect, the progression barely preserves the contours of trimeter, tetrameter, and pentameter lines as he seeks the precise value for weighing the power of those forces that spoke to Democritus of endless swerves and to Plato of a *khora* or cosmic womb. Twice the cascades are stepped-down, as it were, into the cataract's foam and spindrift, one parenthesis nodding toward Eliot's "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," with changes rung on *made* and *remade* in splinter-echo of the doxology.

not at all
 deep canyons of the underself
 but the order in which things fall
 or what intelligence will make of them.

Draped from the rock it
 frills but falls:
 the same pattern, never
 the same water.

You will find
 (I must tell you)
 no great man
 not a man of law.

* * *

no measure fine enough
 eye or finger or numerate brain

immutable change
 made and remade
 laws finer than any known to men

from things made
 being seen and understood
 the invisible things

each frill and fibre
 eternal power

I am moved to venture one upshot to all this, because it would meet the polemical question: Why all this fuss about, not nothing, but nothing more than a master analogy for the arts, in the sorting-out carried through Davie, vis-à-vis Eliot and Pound and Adrian Stokes, and now ludically

remodeled by Wilmer? Because, would run the reply, the current phase of transatlantic poetics probably would shrug at the history. Wilmer identifies it as an historical shift, but its forerunners and practitioners, aside from Hill and Gunn, remain pretty much in the shadows, and, as Wilmer notes, they probably do not even read each other. Nonetheless, what is in play with this shift touches on hazards whose fine grain repay attention given: those points of shade in Ruskin, though lace-like, augur Kenner's conflation of Pound and Bucky Fuller on the cross-measure scaling principle of construction. A poem from the late 1990s, "Olivier Messiaen," construes this shift of analogy, by way of *music* florid with obdurately natural facts, as givens abuzz with sturdy, even harsh, occasions.

What is it this cacophony,
this concord of sounds, some sweet,
some not so sweet? It is
the order of things.

The wingbeat of Bonelli's eagle,
a thunderclap, the song of the hermit thrush,
the city at night—zigzag of siren and horn,
the whoosh of the desert wind.

Terrible is this place: it is
the house of God, the gate of heaven.

Terribilis ist locus iste, from Genesis 28, as the builder's sense of our onic playpen and craft-site: the building code has to do with framing these energies as a Heraclitean *dwelling* although composed of sound. In a poem which escaped the net of Czeslaw Milosz's translators, "From a Notebook: Bon on Lake Geneva," Wilmer along with George Gömöri render parts of the first and last paragraphs as follows, charting the acceptance of just such a construction—now paradoxical, as if snatched from Wilmer's "The Falls."

People say: This *is*—
And there is neither skill nor talent
Able to reach beyond whatever is,
And unnecessary memories lose their strength.

* * *

And landscapes,
Who nourish the human heart with gentle warmth,
What poison is in you that lips are numb,
And arms folded across the chest, and eyes

Like a drowsy animal's. But whoever in what is
 Finds peace, order and an eternal moment
 Will vanish without trace. Do you agree then
 To destroy what is and snatch the eternal moment
 From flux—a gleam on the black river? I do.

Such annihilation of animal reverie by absorptive attention signals Milosz's kinship with Simone Weil, although Wilmer's less apocalyptic measure of attention, paced slowly to let in the builder's respect for weight and obduracy, is no stranger to such voltage. A major earlier diptych, the "Antiphonal Sonnets (Of John Taverner)" from the early 1980s, uses chapel architecture to frame apocalyptic, creative-and-decreational power through analogies to both polyphonic weaving/scattering and building/unbuilding. (After his brief career in sacred music, Taverner became a vigorous iconoclast). These paired sonnets thoroughly anticipate the translation from Milosz and the homage to Messaien.

Although in their best work the major Modernists stayed shy of decisively sorting out intramural analogies among the sister arts, both Pound and Bunting came close to doing so. In "Ode 36" of *Loquitur*, Bunting broke through to a single-breath sister-arts doxology that exhales both Acmeist and Modernist aspirations to construction. The contrast which it offers to Wilmer's *cella* and his scalar "The Ruin" helps one to read the changes:

See! Their verses are laid
 as mosaic gold to gold
 white marble to porphyry
 stone shouldering stone, the dice
 polished alike, there is
 no cement seen and no gap
 between stones as the frieze strides
 to the impending apse:
 the rays of many glories
 forced to its focus forming
 a glory neither of stone
 nor metal, neither of words
 nor verses, but of the light
 shining upon no substance:
 a glory made
 for which all else was made.

While this could stand beside Wilmer's translation of Mandelstam's "Hagia Sophia" (whose companion poem is "Notre Dame de Paris:" "I too

ENDNOTES

1. Wilmer, "Gunn, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans," in Joshua Weiner, ed., *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*. Chicago; Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009, 45ff.
2. Davenport, "Ruskin," *The Death of Picasso*, Shoemaker Hoard, Washington, D. C., 2003, 44.
3. Wilmer, "Song and Stone: Donald Davie Reappraised." *TLS Commentary*, 6 May 2005, 12-13.