

For Craft and Country

James Matthew Wilson

East of Early Winters by Richard Wakefield
(Evansville, IN: The University of Evansville Press, 2006)

No period in the history of the arts more doggedly insisted on its concern with craft—its identification of *artist* with *artisan*—than did the Modernist period at the beginning of the twentieth century. And yet, at no time were the familiar features of craft less in evidence. The American poet Ezra Pound was wont to provide lists of “don’ts” and other prescriptions with the voice of the master craftsman, while his friend and colleague T. S. Eliot had to publish a short apology and explanation, “Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry,” precisely because meter—the formal cause of poetry—was so little in evidence in Pound’s work.¹

The Modernists virulently rejected nineteenth-century Romantic accounts of the artist as “unacknowledged legislator” and visionary by trying to reclaim the historical identity of the arts with craftwork. But they had little interest in giving up the ethereal social authority to which the Romantics had laid claim, and so they sought to straddle the Greek conception of poet as maker with the Roman one of poet as *vates* (as a rather post-doctrinal priest in a religious order). As the poet-critic James Longenbach considered in his study of Pound and the Anglo-Irish poet

W. B. Yeats, the Modernists reconceived the making and judgment of art as a secret brotherhood, even a “*Fratres Minores*.”² If poets were no longer to be priests, they could at least be alchemists and Masons who may share with Christianity a belief in “another reality” more real than that of the workaday bourgeoisie, but who also shared with the modern scientist a technological know-how, an expertise that could not be subjected to the judgment of the uninitiated.

In one of his fragmentary divagations on craft in the first age of free verse, Pound cites Eliot’s authority: “Eliot has said the thing very well when he said, ‘No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.’”³ The Modernists excelled at saying “No,” at ruling what one must not do. But giving positive instruction in verse, rather than just berating the weaker novices of free verse, would have been like betraying guild secrets. This phenomenon extended throughout the Euro-American world, and so the great French neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain at once defended the modesty and integrity of art as craft, but, following Aquinas, insisted that the virtue of art, for the true artist, was connatural, a *habitus*; therefore, the less-than-apparent craft and technique in modern art was to be excused by our appreciating that the artist was *not* indulging idiosyncratic means of self-expression, but rather was subordinating himself to the higher laws of his art. The virtue of art is “the undeivi-

JAMES MATTHEW WILSON teaches in the Department of Humanities at Villanova University. His column, “The Treasonous Clerk,” appears monthly on First Principles at www.firstprinciplesjournal.com.

ating determination of works to be made,” and the artist may least of all “deviate” in his work by flattering the extrinsic laws of contemporary taste.⁴

Whatever the merits of these claims, Modernist art distinguished itself as by and for those who had the *habitus*, and this cemented an already burgeoning divide between the popular arts and the high arts, both of which would in their separate ways grow waterlogged beneath the tide of mass culture. By the late '60s, the apparent formlessness of Modernism had gone radically beyond what its early apologists could have imagined, while the pretensions of secret craft were either abandoned or exposed as superstition. The age of “self-expression,” concept art, and “pop” art was upon us, and the arts in general had entered into a new Dark Ages far more benighted and vacuous than those early Christian centuries that gave us cartoonish reliefs of the Marys at the empty tomb.

I offer these historical remarks in hopes of explaining why Richard Wakefield’s book of poems takes its place as one more important and hard-won advance in the restoration of good poetry to our culture. If our saturation in the cinematic arts all but guarantees poetry will remain a minor art form, there is no reason it ought to be an execrable one. Moreover, well-crafted poetry—where the craft is worn like skin rather than as a secret in the soul—can still offer us fresh but lasting accounts of human experience ordered not only to the beauty of form but to the splendor of wisdom. One of the few places one must go to find such work is to the University of Evansville Press, which under the stewardship of William Baer has been publishing magazines, anthologies, and a poetry book series for nearly two decades. Wakefield’s book appears as part of the Richard Wilbur Award series and makes a worthy, if modest, contribution.

The author also of a book of criticism on Robert Frost, Wakefield’s approach to verse and its narrative material in many ways extends the account of American—especially rural—life that Frost immortalized. The problem with which his poems contend derives precisely from the difficulty of that word “immortalized,” however; for, when poets begin to immortalize something in their work you may be confident it has begun to decay in reality. The first section of *East of Early Winters* attends to this decay, providing us with a series of vivid if plainly spoken vignettes about boyhood in agricultural western Washington. The poems fold in to one another, providing an evocative story of those episodes of burden and initiation that characterize being the youngest in an extended agricultural clan. Significantly, “Horses” begins,

They sent the boy to build a fire
beneath
the steel water trough after a week
of freezing fog had hung a hoary
wreath
on every bud and leaf along the
creek.

While the next, “Horseback,” all but repeats,

The women sent the boy to call the
men
for supper; too young to drive, he
had to ride
this slow and stumbling horse that
never again
would earn its feed or farm this
country side.

These are representative passages; to begin with form, the elegiac stanzas (*abab*), following in the footsteps of Gray, constitute Wakefield’s most frequent form, fol-

lowed closely by Italian quatrains (rhyming *abba*); and, like the mature Frost, Wakefield gives free rein to anapestic substitutions that disrupt without really breaking the pentameter. Although I quote two first sentences that conclude conveniently at the end of the quatrain, Wakefield generally tends to enjamb his lines heavily, and the poems are printed without stanza breaks or the conventional majuscule to denote the start of lines, so that nearly all the poems take on the appearance of plain blocks of distilled colloquial talk. This lack of emphasis suggests the blank verse of Frost or, more distantly, the Lake poets, while in fact every poem but one (“Against the Flood”) is rhymed. As such, his craft is systematic and masterful, while unobtrusive even to the modern ear grown unaccustomed to rhyme.

With such formal attributes noted, however, we have only begun to touch the significance of these parallel openings. Like these, the other poems in the first section of the book (*Rural Matters*), generally narrate instances of a boyhood tasting the first sweat of labor and testing himself in relation to his elders. “Meshing the Gears,” for instance, gives us the boy graduated from riding broken-down horses on errands to driving a “wheezing truck”:

Bad clutch, no synchromesh, it
 would buck
 and kick up dust like a frolicking
 calf in the sun
 if he shifted through the reluctant
 gears without
 a sure but subtle, strong but gentle
 touch.

The enjambment across stanzas may conceal the rhyme from the reader here, but the sense of a slow, indeed natural, maturation into the tools, customs, and practices of farm life shows forth. Frost had writ-

ten, darkly, of “The Need to Be Versed in Country Things,” but Wakefield’s poems depict such “versing” quite sincerely in themselves: the ways of rural life are long to learn, and we encounter repeatedly those moments when the “put-upon” boy witnesses in awe the kind of man’s work for which he is slowly being prepared. However, the collection as a whole casts a dark reflection on these well-observed reveries over childhood and early youth. It is not the breaking-off of the individual vignettes that haunts, but the breaking-off of the way of life they depict. Wakefield *cannot* complement his depictions of boyhood on the farm by further scenes of adulthood and old age, because the way of life as a whole has been dying out for decades and the poet’s (or the poet’s persona’s) family is among its casualties. And so the book cannot become a unified narrative precisely because its subject-matter is the breaking of once enduring cultural continuities.

In consequence of this breaking off of a stable and continuous life, the second section of the book gathers, among other things, odd vignettes—tattered memories—of local characters like “Henry Grady,” who refused to stop for the one traffic light on Main Street because “Hell, he’d been here before it was.” His neighbors thus curse and admire him, depending on where they happen to be in relation to his pickup, but such stories never end well:

A semi sent old Henry to his reward.
 No matter how it’s resisted or
 ignored,
 the future’s coming at us just the
 same.

The culture Wakefield depicts cannot complete its life, because its life has been cut off. Many of his poems about *Others*

end with aphoristic and sententious statements as this one does, underscoring the poignancy and portentousness that the loss of a venerable way of life provokes. The meaning of such episodes is too consequential to be obscure and such summary expressions reinforce the sense that a once living past may either be forgotten outright or sealed in amber. “Scholarship Boy” presents us with a character less colorful than an old codger like Henry, but more familiar: the farm youth whose talent—in this case for basketball—becomes a ticket off the farm and into the mobile meritocracy of contemporary America. Clutching an old practice ball upon his return from college, “He knows / that he was leaving long before he left.”

The book’s final section, *Rural Returns*, begins as one might expect: “They told me if I went / my heart would break to see the place,” the poet observes before returning to the family homestead now overrun by the elements. And other poems mark like journeys to lost homes, as “The Orchard Gate” depicts two brothers getting lost in their effort to find “their parents’ place” after thirty years. Wakefield does not merely show childhood initiations aborted in the name of mobility and “progress,” but accounts for why this came to pass. In “Windfall,” policies of taxation that favor corporate farms and regulations that punish farmers for not maintaining their properties like suburbanites have created a landscape of “‘For Sale’ signs in the fencerow scrub.” The poem’s protagonist makes a “windfall” profit by allowing a beekeeper to let his bees feed on the acres of thistle that have sprung up on land too unprofitable on account of taxation to be planted. And “A Standing Place” takes us back to the New Deal, that moment in American history when the federal government most brazenly asserted itself to establish a new state/corporate regime in which there

would be little room for family farms. In that poem, a farmer looks down upon his flooded land—land flooded permanently now that it is part of the basin of a reservoir, land taken from him through that familiar *raison d’état*, eminent domain.

The volume as a whole, especially in its poems that depict Wakefield grown up, suggest that his has not been a life composed exclusively of regret, but has been rewarded in marital love and the love of God. But the sections that bookend the collection impress upon us that, while it is possible to live well under most circumstances, the now-broken cycle of family farm life was not given up as inferior but, for many, was wrenched away by the hand of the state and the spirit of “consumer” progress. Wakefield gives us not poems of oneiric nostalgia but of measured indignation; one hears in them a plea to those who still farm to allow their children to complete their initiation, as it were, and to persist, and one hears at least the faint hope that our rural returns might not be only those of passing tourists but of a people that has rediscovered and recaptured the worth of farm ways.

Wakefield’s writing is no less devoted to the work of poetry as craft than it is to depicting the craft of rural life. In “Verse and Universe,” Wakefield comments indirectly on Frost’s well-known observation that poetry sets the rhythms of speech against meter. In the poem, Wakefield’s persona is skeptical that such “resistance” or “counterforce” accurately accounts for life in general or poetry in particular, as his interlocutor insists. Certainly, in Frost, one sees the meter often scuffed up to reveal some such tension, as do we in Wakefield. And yet, Frost’s statement may well have been a mere concession to the tastes of Modernism, making his generally traditional versification sound esoteric at a time when art was thought to be filled

with secrets and paradoxes held in tension. Frost never *needed* to break the pentameter to make his verse sound like speech; he broke it only for various localized reasons. In any case, it is not in such “tension” that Frost’s genius lies, and Wakefield’s poems develop Frost’s rural colloquial language by giving us a fluid, natural, and generally prosaic voice. This proves a weakness as well as strength, for Wakefield’s realism is narrative rather than descriptive, and his lyrics are therefore far less vivid of image than were Frost’s greatest poems.

If Frost stressed the unnatural tensions of verse to beat the Modernists at their own game, Wakefield shows that verse that sounds *more* like natural speech than anything Frost wrote can be accomplished in faithful meter and rhyme and that, therefore, these neglected but essential

aspects of poetic craft should be rediscovered not as difficult but as accommodating conditions. “In a Poetry Workshop” wittily mocks the modern scorn of meter and rhyme and its pretentious ticks, such as the refusal to capitalize the first-person subject pronoun. Moderns reject rhyme, alliteration, and assonance “so the reader doesn’t think we’re playing God,” Wakefield observes. But his poems demonstrate that, while a poet’s craft is not the secret of some occult *vates*, it must be analogous to “playing God.” For, these poems, like nature itself, insist unobtrusively but openly, upon the formal principles of intelligible order; they advocate also an order of civilization that has been put into retreat. Of craft and farm country alike, they insist that much which has long lay fallow must be sown again.

1 T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 162–82. 2 James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–33. Cf. for “Fratres Minores,” Ezra Pound, *Personae* (New York: New

Directions, 1990), 78. 3 Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 12. 4 Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 9.

Out of the Shadows and Imaginings

A. S. Duff

George Grant: A Guide to his Thought by Hugh Donald Forbes
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)

George Grant is best known as a Canadian nationalist, as a conservative of such odd coloring that he welcomed the

A. S. DUFF is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. He has recently written on Stanley Rosen’s critique of Leo Strauss in the *Review of Metaphysics*.

formation of a federal socialist party in the 1960s and refused to set foot in the United States during its prosecution of the Vietnam War. He was a conservative who, in his best known book, *Lament for a Nation*, spoke of “the impossibility of conservatism” entailing “the impossibility of Canada.” In Canada he was the inadvertent progenitor of a revived nationalism, often