

an excerpt from

COLLECTED POEMS 1943–2004. By Richard Wilbur. New York: Harcourt, 2004. 577 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Robert Schnall

Richard Wilbur's *Collected Poems 1943-2004* presents almost 600 pages of lyrics and translations in reverse chronology, offering a much-needed overview of the career of one of our preeminent contemporary formalist poets. Wilbur's expertise in any number of difficult forms and meters is astonishing, and his translations from French, Russian, Spanish, and other languages are supple and felicitous. His extensive knowledge of the vocabulary of various disciplines—botany, shipping, architecture, astronomy, music, dance, art, photography—enables him to surprise us with unexpected comparisons, one of many qualities that link him to the metaphysical poets. He modulates his diction with precision, alternating Latinate and Anglo-Saxon words to create rhythmic effects and to play on root meanings. And literary, historical, and mythological allusions further enrich his range of reference. The poems balance lightness—a playful tone and musical cadence, a focus on the pleasures of the flesh, moments of ecstatic wonder of an almost religious intensity—with darkness—a bleaker vision that touches again and again on suffering, isolation, mutability, and death.