The Incompletable Openness of Language: Richard Wilbur's "Fabrications"

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"The real is a closely woven fabric."[1]

Introduction

Richard Wilbur's "Fabrications"[2] opens with the curious image of a spider which, as the morning sun rises, "has repaired her broken web" (3). The speaker characterizes this repair as evidence of "the bright resilience of the frailest form" (2), then catalogues a curious miscellany of things seen through the repaired web (in the second and third stanzas). The particulars of the catalogue yield a generalization about human finitude (in the fourth stanza) before the poem pivots to a tale from the Talmud about travelers (in the fifth). This tale yields additional comments regarding the limits of human knowing (stanzas six and seven) before the poem ends with a description of "an ancient map" and a final reprise of the spider web image (stanzas eight and nine). On a first reading, Wilbur's poem might strike some readers as, at best, only arbitrarily unified by the speaker's stream-of-consciousness, but as my preview of the poem already suggests, "Fabrications" aims at a coherent assessment of human understanding as it takes shape within a world.[3] The issues ap-

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), x.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated I cite Wilbur's poetry, by titles and line numbers, from *Collected Poems 1943-2004* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004). Wilbur's later poetry, including "Fabrications" (from the collection *Mayflies: New Poems and Translations* [New York, NY: Harcourt, 2000]), has not received as much attention as it deserves.

[3] My reading therefore has some affinities with the argument of Elaine James, in "The

pear most directly in two assertions made by the speaker. In the fourth stanza the speaker insists that human beings "must see with human scale and bias," and in the seventh stanza the speaker affirms, "it is not true / That we grasp nothing till we grasp it all."

In what follows, I argue that Wilbur uses the images of a spider's web and human weaving to affirm what Hans-Georg Gadamer characterizes as "the incompletable openness of language." In the remainder of this introduction, I explain the significance of this phrase. In the section following the introduction, I consider traditional uses of the spider-web image. Although both Wilbur and Gadamer agree with several more skeptical voices within this tradition (including Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Barthes) that linguistic meaning changes and can fail, Wilbur and Gadamer treat the corrigibility of language as an appropriate accommodation to human finitude and temporality: that meanings change is not a disaster, but a benefit, since it makes possible human adaptation to emergent circumstances and even enables the correction of error.[4] The survey in the first section prepares for a close reading of Wilbur's poem in the second section.

All this is framed (in several senses) by the poem's two references to spider's webs, and my reading will focus on the significance of this image, though I will also address other images in the poem. Like a number of Wilbur's poems, "Fabrications" suggests meanings rather than spelling them out; it invites readers to puzzle out its implications. What meanings attach to a spider's web? I will develop an answer in the body

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Light of the Eye: The Problem of Richard Wilbur's Metaphysics," *Renascence* 60.3 (2008): 237-250. James says of Wilbur's poems that they "both affirm and demur to the creative power of imagination to supremely order the natural world" (237). Her argument focuses more directly than mine does on the reconciliation of spiritual and material in Wilbur, but we are both interested in the capacity of poetry "to create a provisional and aesthetic ordering of experience" (241). James correctly observes that, often, Wilbur's images "give primacy to the perceiving mind for shaping what it finds" (242). Alan Sullivan reaches a similar conclusion with regard to "Fabrications" in particular, calling it a "meditation in which [Wilbur] triumphantly asserts the continuity of humanly devised and natural forms as aspects of a larger creation" (96 in "Islands of Order: The Poetry of Richard Wilbur," *Sewanee Review* 109.1 [Winter 2001]: 82-101). Unfortunately, Sullivan does not provide an extended reading of the poem. More generally, both Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, *A Reader's Guide to Richard Wilbur* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1995) and Bruce Michelson, *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991) have taught me a great deal about how to read Wilbur, though both books are too early to include discussion of "Fabrications."

[4] For discussion, see Eberhard Jüngel, "Metaphorical Truth," in *Theological Essays*, tr. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1989). Jüngel develops a careful reading of Heidegger in light of Aristotle in order to answer Nietzsche's skepticism with regard to truth.

of the essay, but let me point to the central issue by noticing a dense passage from Roland Barthes. In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes says:

> *Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web).[5]

Recalling the etymological association of his key word "text" with "texture" (= "tissue"),[6] Barthes here recognizes a traditional account of meaning (signaled by "hitherto") as a weaving together of words in and through which human beings have expected to discover the truth of things. Thus far Wilbur would agree. For Barthes, however, who in this book has made the turn from structuralism to poststructuralism, the constructed status of texts (and thus of meaning) effectively undermines the traditional expectation that texts can reveal enduring truth. He is "now emphasizing," as a necessary replacement for the traditional account, an understanding of the text as "a perpetual interweaving." This is Wilbur's "resilience" with a vengeance, because for Barthes ongoing revision of meaning requires the loss of the human subject along with a radical de-stabilizing of meaning; the spider is used up in the construction of its web.[7] More bluntly, the recognition that meanings change entails, for Barthes, that there is no durable truth.

That the spider's web is broken in "Fabrications" admits the fragility of meaning for finite, time-bound human beings. Nevertheless, Wilbur is more hopeful than Barthes with regard to recoveries of meaning. This hopefulness is an aspect of Wilbur's "resilience" that Barthes's vision of the self-consuming spider denies. Barthes suggests that, because our understanding changes, we must abandon any expectation that we will find truth; Wilbur accepts that our access to truth is limited by our human condition (the veil through which we perceive truth), but rejects Barthes's conclusion that truth no longer matters. For Wilbur, the reality that meanings change is not a disaster, but in fact a benefit, since it makes possible adaptation to emergent circumstances and even the cor-

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[5] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 64. A *hypha* is a structure of filament.

[6] And consider "textile."

[7] Barthes's poststructuralism is partly inspired by elements of Nietzsche's thought; I consider Nietzsche's use of the spider-web image below.

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rection of error.

In order to bring out the implications of Wilbur's hopefulness and to explain its expression within the particular unity of the poem, I want to draw Wilbur into a conceptual dialogue with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer himself suggests the usefulness of this pairing. His "Philosophy and Literature"[8] provides an effective gloss for the cluster of ideas Wilbur brings together while also urging the value of poetry for thought:

> The manifestation of sound and the polyphony of meaning coalesce as a peculiar integration of uniqueness which assigns an entirely new *frame* of reference to the single word and lets the whole appear to us as a unique *fabric*. We use a very expressive word for this structure of the poetic word if we call it 'text.' Text means texture; *text means a fabric* which consists of single threads which are so intertwined with one another that the whole becomes a fabric of unique texture. Now I want to say that this is valid in a certain way for every unity of a propositional sentence and is not confined to the literary work of art. But *in the poetic work of art* the fabric of the text receives a new firmness. In fact, a poem is precisely a text which holds itself together by meaning and sound and forms a unity, an insoluble whole.[9]

The passage partly echoes Barthes, but Gadamer interprets texture and textuality differently. Where Barthes finds dissolution, Gadamer anticipates wholeness. In addition, Gadamer anticipates that wholeness may be discovered in a poem. I read Gadamer and Wilbur in tandem because Gadamer's ideas illuminate the philosophical implications that remain latent in Wilbur's poem, while Wilbur's poem makes possible an imaginative access to Gadamer's more abstractly developed philosophical ideas. Here as elsewhere Wilbur argues that the work of the poet is to provide a framework that allows a generation or a community to understand itself and its place in the world.[10] Wilbur's poem not only deals with the same themes Gadamer mentions but also models the textual unity Gadamer expects to find in a well-crafted poem. Taken together Gadamer and Wilbur deliver an alternative to Barthes's skepticism.

In a late essay, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language" (1992, hereafter "Ritual and Language"),[11] Gadamer revisits the herme-

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[8] Gadamer, "Philosophy and Literature," *Man and World* 18 (1985): 241-259.

[9] "Philosophy and Literature," 255, emphasis added.

[10] Compare Martin Heidegger, "Why Poets?" in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and tr. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 200-241

[11] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language," trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt and Monika Reuss, in Schmidt, ed. *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000): 19-50. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

neutic ontology he had developed in *Truth and Method* (1960)[12] in order to underscore the dynamic—and fruitful—incompleteness of language.[13] Putting it simply, a hermeneutic ontology recognizes that, for finite human beings, the world is constituted by and through linguistic descriptions of reality; because of our finitude, including the limits of language, these descriptions will be more or less adequate, but never complete (that is, final or absolute), accounts of reality.[14] Furthermore, because our accounts are never complete, and because our experience is temporal, our attempts at description are ongoing, always being corrected and refined and otherwise modified.[15] Thus Gadamer's construction of a hermeneutic ontology in "Ritual and Language" recognizes the "incompletable openness" of language and of its counterpart reason (20). For the

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[12] Gadamer's most important account of hermeneutic ontology appears in the final subsection of *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989), "Language as Horizon of a Hermeneutic Ontology" (438-491). For discussion, see Daniel O. Dahlstrom, "Hermeneutic Ontology," in R. Poli and J. Seibt, eds., *Theory and Applications of Ontology: Philosophical Perspectives* (Berlin, Germany: Springer Science + Business Media, 2010): 395-415. For an application of Gadamer's idea to another Wilbur poem, "All That Is," see William Tate, "A Rite of Finitude: Richard Wilbur's Hermeneutic Ontology," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 64.1 (Spring 2022): 89-113.

[13] The literature concerning Gadamer's understanding of truth is extensive. Two collections of essays provide a useful overview of some of the key issues: Lawrence K. Schmidt, ed., *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), especially the two essays by Schmidt, the essay by Risser, and the essay by Gadamer; and Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed., *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), especially the essays by Gadamer, Dostal (who helpfully distinguishes Gadamer from Heidegger), Tugendhat (mostly on Heidegger), Grondin, and Wachterhauser.

[14] In her reading of Wilbur, Elaine James appeals to Paul Ricoeur's "notion of narrative coherence," which shares a family resemblance with Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology. See James, "The Light of the Eye," 241 and 248, n. 6.

[15] I interpret Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology as, in part, a development of Martin Heidegger's account of *alethic* truth. According to Heidegger, because we are finite and temporal, every human perception and description of the way things are both discloses and simultaneously conceals what is. Heidegger develops these ideas most famously in §44 of *Being and Time*, but see also "On the Essence of Truth," tr. John Sallis, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 136-154; see, again, Jüngel, "Metaphorical Truth." The most useful overview of Heidegger's account of truth is Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *Heidegger's Concept of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For discussion of some similarities between Heidegger's thought and Wilbur's, see William Tate, "'Where Eyes Become the Sunlight': Roman Fountains in Martin Heidegger and Richard Wilbur," *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* 15:2 (Summer / Fall 2016): 137-158.

purposes of this essay I take as given Gadamer's conclusion that human meanings and human understanding are inescapably linguistic. Though Wilbur, in "Fabrications," doesn't specify that he is assessing language, he is clearly addressing issues of meaning that are interinvolved with language, and his perspective seems to me to align well with Gadamer's.

Philosophy, in particular, according to Gadamer, is "a continual self-overcoming of all its concepts, as a conversation is a continual self-overcoming enabled by the answer of the other. Properly speaking, therefore," he continues, "there are no texts in philosophy in the sense in which we speak of literary texts—or of law texts or Holy Scripture" (43). The distinction in view here is that philosophy, in contrast with these other realms of study, resists (or properly ought to resist) canonizing its insights as absolutes. Because temporal and finite human beings are perpetually adjusting to new experiences and situations, they are continually confronted with new (including revised) questions and attempting to articulate[16] answers to those questions. This evolution of questions and answers is, according to Gadamer, the work of philosophy, carried on in language: philosophy has to do with human meaning-making. "Therefore, the history of philosophy is a continual dialogue with itself. Philosophers have texts because they, just as Penelope, always are undoing their weaving in order to prepare anew for the return home into the true" (43).[17] The first sentence helps explain the second, since Gadamer frequently characterizes the work of philosophy as dialogical or conversational: raveling and weaving figure the give-and-take of the philosophical dialogue. Within Gadamer's thought, meaning is not

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[16] "Articulate" is sometimes used as if it were synonymous with "say," but I mean to use it more narrowly as indicating a human linguistic activity aimed at coherence and fullness of expression. As I use it, "articulate" presupposes and implies the wholeness of what Charles Taylor calls "the linguistic dimension." (But notice that "fullness" and "wholeness" imply only a relative and not a final completeness.) For discussion, see chapter six of Taylor's *The Language Animal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), "Constitution 1: The Articulation of Meaning" (177-263). Taylor's usage may be compared with Michael Polanyi's in the fifth chapter of *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), "Articulation" (69-131), though Taylor emphasizes language and Polanyi emphasizes knowing. With reference to Wilbur's metaphors, "articulation" is the construction of the web, the weaving of the fabric.

[17] Taylor's account of language in *The Language Animal* resembles Gadamer's. Taylor recognizes that human language involves a constitutive articulation which he describes as "the development of the interconnected skein of meanings with its nuanced distinctions and its identification of the occasions and reasons underlying our basic reactions to the world." He says, "The developing skein of meanings in any culture proceeds through the play of definition and ratification" (254). Taylor's "skein" approximates Gadamer's (and Wilbur's) fabric, the weaving of Penelope.

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impossible ("home" is "the true"), though it resists closure; an absolute, permanent homecoming is deferred indefinitely.[18] In the finite, temporal work of philosophy (of human understanding), a conversationalist's statement may clarify and stabilize meaning in a particular context (it may appear to complete a weaving), but then an interlocutor will suggest an emendation or raise a question (ravel the weaving), and the conversation will continue.[19] For Gadamer, as well as for Wilbur, the dynamism of meaning is fundamentally hopeful; it is the linguistic mechanism by which human beings improve our understanding and correct our errors.

Gadamer's comments raise several interesting questions with regard to the status of canons and with regard to the characterization of philosophical work. For the purposes of this paper, however, I want to bracket these questions in order to focus on the two metaphors he conjoins in the last sentence quoted: (1) the comparison of meaning-making with weaving and (2) the association of this meaning-making with a journey "into the true."[20] By a lovely serendipity, Gadamer's collocation of weaving and journeying hints at the underlying unity of Wilbur's "Fabrications." These are the same two metaphors that govern the unfolding ideas of the poem. For Wilbur, as for Gadamer, their juxtaposition represents the reality that the human constitution of meaning is perpetually responsive to changing circumstances.

This paper develops a reading of Wilbur's poem. In the next section of the paper, I contextualize Wilbur's images of weaving: a spider's

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[18] To be clear, my frame of reference here (and that of "Fabrications") is the present age (*hoc saecula*) rather than eternity (*saecula saeculorum*). Deferral is indefinite, but not permanent. Wilbur's image of the map in "Fabrications" suggests something of the poet's role as a cartographer in aid of an ongoing journey; in traditional terms, the poet offers a *scientia viatorum* appropriate to the present age (and analogous with Gadamer's "continual dialogue"), rather than a *scientia comprehensorum*.

[19] In the summary of human understanding with which he concludes *The Language Animal*, Taylor says that reason "must take a largely hermeneutical turn; and this brings with it a certain endlessness, *a resistance to completion*, the impossibility of resting in some supposedly 'final' and unimprovable conclusion" (338, emphasis added).

[20] Penelope's description of her weaving in the Odyssey (19.149) uses the verb ὑφαίνω (*hyphaino*), cognate with Barthes's *hypha*. (The meaning persists in later Greek; "woven" in John 19:23, for example, is ὑφαντός, *hyphantos*.) The significance of Penelope's weaving raises possibilities well beyond those suggested by Gadamer. I will not address these here. A useful starting point is a blog post by Ioanna Papadopoulou, "Penelope's Great Web: The Violent Interruption," at the Center for Hellenic Studies website, Harvard University (March 10, 2016). https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/penelopes-great-web-the-violent-interruption/. Accessed January 4, 2024. Papadopoulou discusses the key passages from the *Odyssey*.

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repair of "her broken web" and its complement, the human use of weavers' looms. In effect, this section locates Wilbur in Gadamer's "continual dialogue" of philosophy by tracing the various uses that philosophers (as well as other thinkers) in the Western tradition have made of the web/weaving image to characterize human understanding in general and linguistic meaning in particular. Wilbur's interests are often philosophical, and I take as self-evident the reasonableness of treating him as a philosopher in something relevantly like Gadamer's sense.[21] The poem's recognition that spider webs break implicitly acknowledges that human meanings (and human understanding) likewise break down (Penelope ravels her weaving), but the fact that the spider repairs her web affirms that this linguistic entropy need not be (probably will not be) total: meaning can be recovered and revised (Penelope reweaves her fabric). The final section of the paper builds on the broader context in order to develop close readings of key passages in the poem.

When Wilbur's speaker says that "it is not true / That we grasp nothing till we grasp it all," he means that the impermanence and incompleteness of the ways in which humans "frame" or "fabricate" (or articulate or linguistically/rationally constitute) the world do not defeat the belief that we achieve a viable and adequately true grasp of the way things are. Like Gadamer, Wilbur readily acknowledges human finitude—in particular, the incompleteness of our knowing—but he denies that knowing everything is necessary to our knowing anything.[22]

As Gadamer similarly insists in "Ritual and Language," "Language [like reason] is clearly not a totality . . . [and] does not encompass the whole of being in its presentness . . . but rather . . . it can also be an entity within the whole and is only aimed toward the unity" (20).[23] Language is

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[21] Gadamer observes, in a 1995 interview, that it is merely "a very popular prejudice that philosophy is just a speciality of philosophers. But that is erroneous. It is a speciality for all human beings." He goes on explicitly to include poets in this human work: "That is why I studied classical philosophy—and not only philosophy, but also classical philology, because *without poets there is no philosophy*" (29-30 in "Without Poets There Is No Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 69 [January/February 1995]: 27-35, emphasis added). See also Gadamer, "The Eminent Text and Its Truth," *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 13.1 (Spring 1980): 3-10.

[22] Compare Taylor's comment regarding the "development of the skein" of language: "But the languages which articulate human meaning . . . constitute a series of attempts to express and make sense of the meanings which animate our lives, which attempts can never come to final closure in a totally adequate form, needing no further articulation" (*The Language Animal*, 260).

[23] In this paragraph Gadamer coordinates language and reason; my ellipses pass over this coordination for the sake of simplicity.

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"universal" in the sense that it is always relevant for human understanding, but universality does not require totality: "Language is a universal and in no way a completed whole." Because of the close relationship between language and reason, "the same incompletable openness, as lies in the concept of language and linguisticality, must be considered in the concept of reason." My thesis amounts to the claim that Wilbur's "Fabrications" endorses something very like a Gadamerian hermeneutic ontology—for which every human description of being retains its hermeneutic "openness" precisely because description is "incompletable" from the point of view of finite, temporal describers.

The Web of Meaning

In the opening section of "Fabrications" Wilbur addresses human efforts to articulate knowing by adopting the traditional image of the spider's web, here first "broken," then "mended" (because "form" is "resilient," 1-3).[24] Both the title of the poem and the spider image recall the opening lines of Wilbur's "Lying," where the association of the web with human meanings is more immediately evident.[25] The speaker there asserts that "the delicate web of human trust," a web that is ordinarily maintained in the give-and-take of conversation, will not "be ruptured by [the] airy fabrication" of a benign lie. The web in "Lying" represents the interconnected, interpersonal, at least partly ordered accumulation of meanings shared by a human community.[26] The web in "Fabrications" similarly represents meaning as structured, but adds (or makes more explicit) the notion that a community's participation in such shared structures determines (or helps determine) what that community can become aware of or express by providing the "frame" through which that community perceives the world.

Though in contemporary English "web" primarily refers to the con-

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[24] Wilbur uses similar images to similar effect in other poems; the "mycelium" in "All That Is," for example, indicates a constructed and reliable understanding of the world. "All That Is" also mentions "the hidden webwork of the world" (50).

[25] I consider "Lying" in "Something in Us Like the Catbird's Song," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13:3 (Summer 2010): 105-123, where I examine Wilbur's understanding of metaphor as a central feature of poetic truth-telling, situating his thinking with reference to Heidegger and Nietzsche.

[26] As Clifford Geertz observes, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," so that the study of human culture is "an interpretive [science] in search of meaning" (quoted by G. B. Madison in "Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality," *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis B. Hahn, Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1997, 354. Madison cites *The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973], 5.)

structions that spiders make with their silk, that usage derives from an Old English word for woven fabric, and Wilbur invokes both meanings. Moreover, his usage in "Lying" indicates his general awareness that "web" has long been used in an extended sense to name orderly systems of meaning (generally recognized as linguistic). It will be useful to consider several examples of these traditional uses as contexts for Wilbur's poem.

Early Modern usage of the spider image is largely negative. In *The Advancement of Learning*, for example, Francis Bacon describes the elaboration of detail in dogmatic systems as "cobwebs of learning admirable for their fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit."[27] The point of the image is that this fineness derives from the overactive imaginations of scholastic spiders; Bacon has in view syllogistic expansions of Aristotelianism that have no apparent practical value, particularly as these occlude a culture's awareness of experientially available data. Similarly, the Puritan Thomas Goodwin criticized "the Schoolemen" (that is, Medieval scholastics, Christian theological practitioners of Aristotelian method) who in "their speculations [spent] their precious wits in framing curious webs out of their own bowels."[28]

Perhaps echoing Bacon, who had once employed him as secretary, Thomas Hobbes, in *De Corpore*, appropriates the web image in order specifically to express skepticism with regard to linguistic meaning: "language and speech are like the webs of spiders . . . Tender and squeamish minds stick to the words and get ensnared in them, but strong minds break through them."[29] By means of the spider-web image Hobbes underscores the arbitrariness of language, which he regards as severely compromising language's truth-value. He continues, "it can be inferred

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[27] Bacon is quoted by James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky in *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Templeton Press, 2018), 32.

[28] Goodwin is quoted by Peter Harrison in "Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge, and the Reformation of Natural Philosophy in Early Modern England," *Isis* 92.2 (June 2001): 265-290, 277.

[29] Hobbes is quoted, and discussed at length, by Martin Heidegger, in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 183-192; I quote from 191. Heidegger's explication of Hobbes in §16 of *Basic Problems* provides a context for his development of his own explanation of truth as unveiling (alethic) in §18. On Hobbes's philosophy of language, see also Katarzyna Doliwa, "The Role of Language in the Philosophical System of Thomas Hobbes," *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 6.19 (2003): 39-49, and Stewart Duncan, "Hobbes on Language: Propositions, Truth and Absurdity," in A. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoesktra, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 57-72.

from this that the first truths sprang from the free judgment of those [*ab arbitrio eorum*] who first imposed names on things."[30] As the spider's web is easily broken, so meaning is frangible. Considered as a medium for truth, language is manipulable and therefore unreliable.

The Prussian linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, like Bacon, associates the web image with system-building; like Hobbes, he acknowledges the limits of human understanding in his use of the spider-web image:

> Language can be compared to an immense web, in which every part stands in a more or less clearly recognizable connection with the others, and all with the whole. Whatever his point of departure, man always makes contact in speaking with a merely isolated portion of the fabric.[31]

Humboldt recognizes that human understanding as mediated by language will be limited, but he is more generally hopeful about meaning than Hobbes, affirming "the whole." Humboldt's "fabric" illuminates one meaning of Wilbur's "fabrications," the reminder that we "must see with human scale and bias" (15). Because we are finite, we never grasp the whole. But Humboldt, like Wilbur, thinks that we nevertheless grasp reality in part by means of language. (Gadamer also acknowledges a "whole" while recognizing that humans only ever grasp a part.)

Friedrich Nietzsche's use of the spider-web image is especially interesting. It appears twice in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,"[32] where he "pushes to its furthest point the paradox of language that is figural through and through and thus reputed to be deceitful."[33] After asking "What then is truth?" Nietzsche answers that it is "the obligation

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[30] Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 191. Heidegger rejects Hobbes's version of modernism in support of his own attempt to recover a pre-modern and counter-modern account of truth. As Elaine James notices (following John Crowe Ransom), Wilbur's particular reconciliation of meaning and materiality makes him "an apt critic of modernism" ("Light of the Eye," 238).

[31] Humboldt is quoted by Charles Taylor in *The Language Animal* (20, n. 25; I correct one typographical error). Humboldt probably influenced Gadamer. Henry James, in "The Art of Fiction," also associates the image with an incomplete system of meaning: "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue […] and when the mind is imaginative […] it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations." Quoted in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 665.

[32] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and tr. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), hereafter cited parenthetically. For discussion, see Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, tr. Duncan Large (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 61-73.

[33] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

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to lie in accordance with firmly established convention." He then praises, ironically, the human capacity to use language:

> Here one can certainly admire humanity as a mighty architectural genius who succeeds in erecting the infinitely complicated cathedral of concepts on moving foundations, or even . . . on flowing water; admittedly, in order to rest on such foundations, it has to be like a thing constructed from a spider's webs,[34] so delicate that it can be carried off on the waves and yet so firm as not to be blown apart by the wind.[35] By these standards the human being is an architectural genius who is far superior to the bee; the latter builds with wax which she gathers from nature, whereas the human being builds with the far more delicate material of concepts which he must first manufacture from himself. In this he is to be much admired—but just not for his impulse to truth. (147)

The passage is playfully ambiguous. On the one hand, Nietzsche praises, by means of the architectural image, the human ability to create systems of meaning (147).[36] On the other hand, the cathedral of meaning seems radically uncertain, founded on running water and fabricated of spider's webs. Though Nietzsche calls these "firm," he also characterizes them as "delicate" and highlights their pliability—that is their instability (and thus infirmity).[37] By means of the traditional contrast between the spider and the bee,[38] he suggests a preference for the self-sufficiency of the spider,[39] using the contrast to underscore the subjectivity of human

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[34] I here substitute "spider's webs" for the "cobwebs" of Speirs's translation.

[35] I suspect an ironic allusion to Ephesians 4:14, which indicates that doctrinal teaching within the Church intends "that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

[36] Perhaps especially theological systems, as implied by "cathedral."

[37] The foundations (and thus by implication foundationalist epistemologies) are shaky for Nietzsche; we are here well on the way to Barthes's poststructuralism.

[38] Consider the episode of the spider and the bee in Jonathan Swift's *The Battle of the Books.* The spider represents the Moderns, who rely exclusively on resources in themselves and reject tradition, whereas the bee represents the Ancients, who cherished tradition and drew on it for inspiration. Before their debate, the bee escapes from and breaks the spider's web. Edmund Spenser's representation of the spider in *Muiopotmos* provides another analogue (though in *Muiopotmos* the spider's opposite is the butterfly).

[39] Preference for the spider is characteristic of Romantic subjectivism. An important example is Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider" in which his speaker distances himself from the bee-like poetic practice that imitates earlier models and primarily uses traditional materials. Whitman, like the spider, wants to create out of his own (individual, autonomous) resources:

A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

meaning, and therefore its distance from objective truth. (Nietzsche is thus Barthes's conceptual ancestor.)

Herman Bavinck summarizes the traditional distinction that Nietzsche has in view: "The scientific investigator does not resemble the spider or the ant, but the bee; he gathers the honey of knowledge from the flowers of experience."[40] Bavinck here recalls Bacon. In *The New Organon* Bacon had explained:

> Those who have treated of the sciences have been either empirics or dogmatical. The former like ants only heap up and use their store, the latter like spiders spin out their own webs. The bee, a mean between both, extracts matter from the flowers of the garden and the field, but works and fashions by its own efforts. The true labor of philosophy resembles hers, for it neither relies entirely or principally on the powers of the mind, nor yet lays up in memory the matter afforded by the experiments of natural history and mechanics in its raw state, but changes and works it in the understanding.[41]

Bacon favors the bee because the bee *both* gathers from the world around it *and* contributes something of itself in the cultivation of knowledge. Nietzsche reverses Bacon's preferences: Nietzsche's human being is spider-like, building with "the delicate material" which derives only "from himself." In Nietzsche's assessment, the bee's honeycomb is as much an artificial construction as the spider's web, but less impressive because the bee depends on nature for its materials.

Nietzsche returns to the comparison of the spider with the bee later in "Truth and Lying." Concerning "laws of nature" he says, "these we produce within ourselves and from ourselves with the same necessity as a spider spins" (150). In other words, the "laws of nature" only appear to be laws within the framework supplied by a human perspective, so that there is no reason to regard a human perspective as more true than other possible perspectives (such as those of "a bird, a worm, or a plant," 149). We invent, along with language, an order which we then discover.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul. (Lightly modernized.)
In terms of Swift's taxonomy (see previous note), Whitman emphatically chooses the Moderns.

[40] *The Philosophy of Revelation*, tr. Geerhardus Vos, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 48.

[41] Bacon is cited by James T. Cushing, in *Philosophical Concepts in Physics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 24. I was directed to Cushing by Tim Morris and Don Petcher, *Science and Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 24.

Nietzsche again expands by mentioning the bee:

> Originally, as we have seen, it is *language* which works on building the edifice of concepts; later it is *science*. Just as the bee simultaneously builds the cells of its comb and fills them with honey, so science works unceasingly at the great *columbarium* of concepts, the burial site of perceptions, builds ever-new, ever-higher tiers, supports, cleans, renews the old cells, and strives above all to fill that framework which towers up to vast heights and to fit into it in an orderly way the whole empirical world, i.e., the anthropomorphic world. (150)

In other words, our expectations determine what we receive as knowledge, we make everything we receive fit into our system, and anything that does not fit does not count.

For Nietzsche, the bee's honeycomb suggests the *columbarium*—the artificial pigeonholes—of human categorizing (including, probably, Kant's categories), but for Nietzsche, the beehive structure is as artificial as the spider's web is for Bacon. Human beings first invent the categories, then find objects to fit into those categories. Nietzsche's manipulation of the traditional contrast thus deliberately collapses it: both the spider's work and the bee's work are ultimately arbitrary, defined anthropomorphically. Metaphors become the categories and laws of science or theology as they become conventional. The bee converges with the spider, or as Sarah Kofman says, "the beehive is just a spider's web."[42] The multi-tiered *columbarium* rises from the foundation of the spider's web on water. Nietzsche rounds off his discussion by claiming, "Actually, the waking human being is only clear about the fact that he is awake thanks to the rigid and regular web of concepts, and for that reason he sometimes comes to believe that he is dreaming if once that web of concepts is torn apart by art" (151).[43]

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[42] *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, 69.

[43] Wilbur alludes to Lewis Carroll when he mentions "the Red King's dream" in the seventh stanza of "Fabrications." When he refers to dreams, Wilbur (1) regularly admits (with Nietzsche, in a sense) the difficulty of distinguishing waking from dreaming, but (2) insists (contra Nietzsche) that the dream-likeness of life does not cancel its reality. Lines 21-24 of "An Event" identify something like linguistic constitution with dreaming: "It is by words and the defeat of words / Down sudden vistas of the vain attempt, / That for a flying moment one may see / By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt." The best gloss, I think, for this passage in "An Event," as well as for the allusion to the Red King in "Fabrications," appears in the closing lines of "Thyme Flowering among Rocks": "The world's / A dream, Basho said, // Not because that dream's / A falsehood, but because it's / Truer than it seems" (38-42). For discussion of "An Event," see William Tate, "Avian Diptych: Richard Wilbur's Flights of Imagination," *Christianity and Literature* 65:3 (2016): 310-326, and chapter 3 of Elizabeth Lynch's master's thesis, *"Beauty Joined to Energy": Gravity and Graceful Movement in Richard Wilbur's Poetry* (University of New Orleans, 2015).

The Spider's Broken Web

The "web of concepts . . . torn apart" is Wilbur's starting point in "Fabrications" (as it is also in "Lying"). Like Nietzsche and Hobbes (among others) Wilbur grants the constructed nature of language—one clear implication of his title. Resisting the totalizing skepticism that characterizes their accounts of system, however, Wilbur deploys the image of the spider's web in support of a modest confidence.[44] According to Wilbur, human understanding of the world is *both* derived from reliable observation/perception (we properly "bear witness," according to "Lying") *and* limited by human finitude, fallibility, and imagination. His first three lines concur in the awareness that language is fragile, but also indicate that this fragility can be countered (so that it does not defeat meaning): "As if to prove again / The bright resilience of the frailest form, / A spider has repaired her broken web." We have seen Hobbes suggest that the breaking of the web of human meanings demonstrates that language is unreliable, but Wilbur asserts that such breaches are reparable. His use of this image near the beginning of "Lying" is more explicit; there "the delicate web of human trust" will not be (irreparably) "ruptured by" the "airy fabrication" of a lie (5-6), though the lie formally breaches trust.

As the second stanza of "Fabrications" elaborates the image, its significance broadens. The spider's web is "Etched on the clear new light / Above the still imponderable ground," so that the web becomes "a single and gigantic eye" (5-7). "Etched" implies a hard surface, like a piece of glass; the verb thus further transforms the web/eye into a picture window. Wilbur similarly combines these images in a more recent poem, "Anterooms," where he relates both web and window to the experience of dreams: "Dreams, which interweave / All our times and tenses, are / What we can believe: // Dark they are, yet plain, / Coming to us now / as if / Through a cobwebbed pane."[45] Paraphrasing these lines we may say that human beings believe what we can make sense of, which comes

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[44] Wilbur's position in "Fabrications" looks to me like some variety of direct or naive realism; I take this to mean, roughly, that we human beings have access to actual things in the material world which, in our ordinary doing, we simply (and reasonably and justifiably) take as given, without verifying—or even, usually, considering—evidence for their actuality. This access is limited/finite, but (often enough) reliable nevertheless. Wilbur's realism resembles the robust pluralist realism championed by Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor in *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), or so it seems to me. Dreyfus and Taylor are consciously building on a Heideggerian-Gadamerian pattern. They explain that "language- and world making are not arbitrary; they are in response to something. This is the point of the Heideggerian image that humans are 'the shepherds of Being'" (129).

[45] In *Anterooms* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

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to us as if through a specific window-pane (a point of view), and which receives some of its character from the pattern of obscurity and clarity imposed by a cobweb (like etching) on the glass. The interweaving of obscurity (darkness) and clarity (plainness) is dreamlike, but reliable enough.

As Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus explain "To look at something, we need to make the indeterminate scene before us determinate, stabilize the background, focus on an object, and optimize the viewing conditions."[46] The spider web in "Fabrications" functions in all these ways. Providing a frame (and as if counteracting Nietzschean instability), it stabilizes and orients the perspective of the poem's speaker. Elsewhere in *Retrieving Realism* Dreyfus and Taylor remark that "In the nature of things, some or other such framework will always be there, making sense of what we do. Frameworks shift . . . but as a class they are inescapable. In particular, where and when we are form part of the framework of our lives, in relation to which we go about the things we're doing, including the things we question and argue about."[47] Although Wilbur's usage partly concurs in the Romantic appropriation of the spider image as indicating human participation in the construction of meaning, he resists the implication (whether Romantic or Nietzschean or Barthesian) that human construction is the only (source of) meaning. His deployment of the spider image, in other words, allows for both the independence of the world from the spider/maker and the relevance of what the spider/maker makes as framing an adequate human understanding of the world.

The fact that we look through a frame does not necessarily vitiate the reality of what we see. In "Fabrications," the web-window determines and focuses, but legitimately enables, a point of view. In contrast with Nietzsche, for whom the friability of language implies that it cannot adequately grant access to the world beyond language, Wilbur represents language as that *through* which we access reality. Language is like the picture window through which another of Wilbur's speakers observes a bird in "A Sketch": it conditions what is seen through it—limits and perhaps even partially falsifies what is seen—but enables real seeing nevertheless.

The third stanza of "Fabrications" specifies a few things as they are seen through the spider-web eye, concisely illustrating the efficacy of such determinate viewing. These include "steeples brightening" (10,

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[46] *Retrieving Realism*, 59.
[47] *Retrieving Realism*, 20, where they are explicating Wittgenstein.

echoing "bright" in 2). The phrase recalls the "Gold crosses" that "each morning brings again to light" in "Lying" (18-19).[48] Things seen through the spider web also include "vultures kettling in the lofts of air" (12), embedding an echo of Wilbur's "Still, Citizen Sparrow," in which the titular sparrow is urged to acknowledge the beauty and utility of the vulture—that is, to grant the validity of a perspective and behaviors different from its own.[49]

The fourth stanza of "Fabrications" specifies parallels between the spider's web-making and human meaning-making: "Each day men frame and weave / In their own way whatever looms in sight, / Though they must see with human scale and bias, / And though there is much unseen." In "Lying" Wilbur makes a similar point by contrasting human seeing with what and how bees see: "All these things / Are there before us, there before we look / Or fail to look; there to be seen or not / By us, as by the bee's twelve-thousand eyes, / According to our means and purposes" (26-30; notice the ambiguity in the first "before," which might be read as either spatial or temporal and invites both).[50] As temporal and embodied beings, we don't see everything, but that doesn't mean we don't see anything.

"Frame" in "Fabrications" echoes the imagined window or picture frame formed by the spider's web in stanza two, but in addition, before "weave" and "looms," indicates a weaver's loom. Human beings regularly provide frames for their own pictures. Like Penelope (according to Gadamer's suggestion), they weave the textures of their developing stories. Recalling again Wilbur's title, they fabricate—create the fabric of—the meanings of their lives. In these manifestations of human creativity, human beings are participants with the world in creating; we do not create *ex nihilo*.

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[48] I suspect an allusion to Marianne Moore's "The Steeple-Jack," in which "[a] steeple-jack in red, has let a rope down as a spider spins a thread" (in *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman [New York: Viking, 2003], lines 23-4). Moore's poem is also about perception and perspective.

[49] My focus in this paper is on the possibility of immanent meaning, but the details I mention in this paragraph—crosses, steeples, and the sparrow (alluding, in "Still, Citizen Sparrow," to such biblical passages as Matthew 10:29)—indicate Wilbur's related confidence in the possibility of transcendent meaning. Development of the insight would require a separate, though parallel, argument.

[50] Martin Heidegger, in a remarkable section of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), also considers how bees see in contrast with how human beings see: "we can understand *what the bee's eye achieves and its character as an organ* insofar as it is determined by *the bee's specific capacity for seeing*" (230, emphasis original; see also 193).

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The primary sense of "looms," of course, is visual: to loom is to appear in a shadowy (that is, indeterminate) form (as the ground is indeterminate, "imponderable," in line 6). But humans make sense of the indeterminate by giving it determinacy (articulating it) in language. What we encounter, we *make sense of*, or better, *make the sense of*, and Wilbur affirms this meaning-making or meaning-finding as both inevitable and legitimate. In such weaving, human beings are like the spider, and what they weave is the web of meaning. Like the spider's web, our frameworks of meaning sometimes break down. As the consideration of Gadamer above suggests, such breaking down (including linguistic entropy) occurs because we are temporal and finite. As language evolves and as circumstances change, previously useful descriptions become less apt and require repristination, even at times replacement: Penelope ravels the weaving that served for one day in order to reconstruct her fabric(ation) for another day.

As Gadamer insists, Penelope's weaving maintains the possibility of homecoming, and fittingly, Wilbur's poem turns from web and weaving to a journey and a map in its next stanzas. The fifth and sixth stanzas synopsize a story from the Talmud about travelers who are warned not to step into a river that may be bottomless.[51] Wilbur then writes, "The world is bottomless." His assessment again anticipates Dreyfus and Taylor, who write: "We are always and inevitably thinking within . . . taken-as-there frameworks . . . the number of things which an eccentric, philosophical mind could raise questions about is indefinite, endless. We would never get to the bottom"[52] Moreover, Wilbur still sounds like Dreyfus and Taylor when he adds, "it is not true / That we grasp nothing till we grasp it all" (27-28). Our inability to "get to the bottom" of things, to "grasp it all," may call for a detour, but it doesn't require cancelling every journey.

As illustration of his crucial claim, Wilbur directs attention to an "ancient map / Where . . . blank and namelessness surround / A little mushroom clump of towers / In which we may infer civility" (29-32). The description indicates not only the outdatedness of the map, but also its incompleteness: blank spaces—openness—around its edges imply undiscovered regions, places without names (that is, without linguistic description). Despite these evident lacunae, the map is viable. We could use it to find the city implied by the towers. In *Need to Know*, John Stack-

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[51] Though Wilbur's source is not *The Odyssey*, the story has generic similarities to the adventures of Odysseus on his journey home to Penelope.

[52] *Retrieving Realism*, 20.

house considers the incompleteness of maps, asking "to what extent can we call a map true?" He answers that truth "is a quality of an interpretation as follows: *To the extent* that the interpretation *corresponds* to the *reality* it represents, it is *true*"[53] (141-142). On this understanding "a map can be true *more or less*": "In an *absolute* sense . . . no map is completely true as no map can possibly represent every detail of the reality it describes" (142). Unconsciously echoing Wilbur's core assertion, he concludes that in our ordinary living "we encounter the tension between our grasping something of reality without being able to claim that we grasp it all" (155). Like language and reason in Gadamer's thought, Wilbur's map should be understood as an interpretation of what is; precisely because it shares their "incompletable openness" it remains useful.[54] Given time, some of the empty places on the map, like the gaps in the spider's broken web, can be filled in ways that make the map more useful, though the works of filling and repairing will never be completed by human finitude.

In the city that we could discover by using the incomplete and imprecise map, "we may infer civility" (32), the presence of human beings, even though the map doesn't specify their presence. In such a city we might also imagine, according to the last two lines of the poem, "a pillar at whose top / A spider's web upholds the architrave" (35-36).[55] Wilbur is not asserting an impossibility. We know that a spider's web is insufficient to uphold (in the sense of physically supporting) either a pillar or the entablature atop the pillar. To make such an assertion would be to return to Nietzsche's whimsical and skeptical picture of the spider-web-on-water as foundation. Wilbur has in mind another meaning of "uphold": to bear witness to or to confirm. Understood in this sense, the image returns us to the poem's opening lines. The "spider's web upholds the architrave" by framing it so as to direct our attention to it.

Taken as an answer to Nietzsche (and other thinkers mentioned above), these closing lines assert, not that language or reason (as represented by the spider's web) are sufficient to achieve durable foundations for knowing, but only that language helps us catch incomplete and corrigible glimpses of the architecture of things as they are. Moreover, Wilbur implies here what he states directly in "Lying" (as well as in "Mayflies,"

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[53] John G. Stackhouse, Jr. *Need to Know: Vocation as the Heart of Christian Epistemology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[54] If it included every detail, the level of detail would defeat the usefulness of the map.

[55] Sullivan aptly calls "architrave" a "crossword-puzzle word" ("Islands of Order," 100). In "All That Is," Wilbur uses crossword puzzle construction as a figure for what I am here calling a "hermeneutic ontology" (for discussion, see Tate, "Rite of Finitude").

the title poem of the collection in which "Fabrications" appears): the poet is one who is particularly enabled to see and then to bear witness to what he or she sees.[56] As he explains in "Some Notes on 'Lying,'" "The poem assumes that the essential poetic act is the discovery of resemblance, the making of metaphor, and that, the world being one thing, all metaphor tends toward the truth."[57] In the terms suggested by "Fabrications" (and recalling Gadamer) the poet is a maker like Penelope, who renews human seeing by weaving a web—framing a perspective. The poet is a cartographer, guiding others through an unfamiliar landscape.[58]

By circling back to his opening image, Wilbur suggests the circulation suited to an "incompletable openness of language." We describe the world in an open system, and emergent contingencies require us to return, and return again, to revise our descriptions. In contrast with Barthes, for whom the fragility of language finally dissolves the language user by rendering her voiceless (because for Barthes ambiguity defeats the *mens auctoris*),[59] Wilbur maintains hope in the give-and-take of finite human language use. The poem adopts traditional images in order to figure forth something like Gadamer's "incompletable openness of language" so as to affirm something like Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology. Like Gadamer, Wilbur anticipates a "continual dialogue"[60] pictured as the weaving and re-weaving of our understanding while we finitely make our way toward a closure we can't yet fully articulate. Although we do not grasp everything, in language we may truly grasp something of the way things are. Often enough, our incomplete grasp is sufficient to be getting on with.[61]

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[56] In "Lying" he says, "In the strict sense, of course, / We invent nothing, merely bearing witness / To what each morning brings again to light" (16-18). In "Mayflies" the speaker recognizes himself as "one whose task is joyfully to see / How fair the fiats of the [divine] caller are" (23-24).

[57] In Wilbur, *The Catbird's Song: Prose Pieces 1963-1995* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 140.

[58] It seems possible to make a connection here with Heidegger's appropriation of Novalis's sense that we human beings are not at home—Heidegger's etymological deployment of the *unheimlich*. See William Tate, "Stalled by Our Lassitude," *Renascence* 72.4 (Fall 2020): 231-248.

[59] The "spider dissolving" in *The Pleasure of the Text* corresponds to "the death of the author" proclaimed by Barthes in *Image Music Text* (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1977), 142-148.

[60] "Ritual and Language," 43.

[61] I am grateful to Steve Kaufmann, John Wingard, Becky Pennington, Tim Morris, and Robert Erle Barham for their helpful responses to earlier versions of this essay. I am also grateful for helpful recommendations made by reviewers for *Humanitas*.