

## GETTING IT RIGHT:

### RADICAL SOLITUDE AND THE POETRY OF JACK GILBERT

As the story goes, one day in the early 1950s Allen Ginsberg rode across the San Francisco Bay and walked far into the woods of Sausalito to get Jack Gilbert's opinion on a new poem. Gilbert and Ginsberg were both participants in Jack Spicer's seminal Poetry As Magic workshop, which also included Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, Charles Olson, Ed Dom and Robert Creeley. Living then, as he describes, "like a hippie without drugs," Gilbert fell in with the poets who would later become important figures in the San Francisco Renaissance, and often fell out with them regarding what poetry is and how to write it. Though he stayed friends with Ginsberg until that poet's death in 1997, Gilbert came to view the whole poetry scene then as a circus. As he wrote in a poem from that time, "Two days ago they were playing the piano / With a hammer and a blowtorch. / Next week they will read poetry / To saxophones [...]. They laugh so much. / So much more than I do. / It doesn't wear them out / As it wears me out [...]."

This time, though, Gilbert liked what he read: "Finally," he said to Ginsberg, "this is beautiful and wonderful stuff." The piece turned out to be the first lines of "Howl," the poem that would, when published by City Lights in 1956, launch the Beat movement and make Allen Ginsberg one of the best known poets in America. Gilbert too was soon to find literary stardom. His first book, *Views of Jeopardy* (1962) came out when Gilbert was thirty-seven, to considerable acclaim, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and winning the Yale Younger Poets

Award. The collection was lauded by many renowned poets of the day, including Dudley Fitts, Stanley Kunitz, Denise Levertov, Theodore Roethke, Muriel Ruckeyser and Stephen Spender. Suddenly he was considered to be the most gifted new poet in America, and was even photographed for *Glamour* and *Vogue*. But, however much acclaim he, like the Beats, had acquired by the middle of the 1960s, the trajectory of Gilbert's career would be distinctly different from that of any other American poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Much of the praise given to *Views of Jeopardy* focused on "The Abnormal Is Not Courage." The poem considers the beauty of extraordinary acts:

The Poles rode out from Warsaw against the German  
tanks on horses. Rode knowing, in sunlight, with sabers.  
A magnitude of beauty that allows me no peace.  
And yet this poem would lessen that day. Question  
the bravery. Say it is not courage. Call it a passion.  
Would say courage isn't that. Not at its best.  
It was impossible. and with form. They rode in sunlight.  
Were mangled. But I say courage is not the abnormal.  
Not the marvelous act. Not Macbeth with fine speeches.  
The worthless can manage in public, or for the moment.  
It is too near the whore's heart: the bounty of impulse,  
the failure to sustain even small kindness.  
Not the marvelous act, but the evident conclusion of being.

Not strangeness, but a leap forward of the same quality.  
Accomplishment. The even loyalty. But fresh.  
Not the Prodigal Son, nor Faustus. But Penelope.  
The thing steady and clear. Then the crescendo.  
The real form. The culmination. And the exceeding.  
Not the surprise. The amazed understanding. The marriage,  
not the month's rapture. Not the exception. The beauty  
that is of many days. Steady and clear.  
It is the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.

The poem, which is probably still anthologized more than any of Gilbert's other poems, contains many elements that would come to distinguish his distinct style: the use of direct statement, crisp lines mixing short and long grammatical units, the presentation of conflicting perceptions, the weaving of narrative and argumentation to move the poem along (with the argument developing through a series of negations and affirmations), the use of literary and mythological references, and the subtle introduction of a counter narrative through the affirmation of Penelope's achievement. Many of Gilbert's central themes are present: the importance of conscious awareness and a sense of wonder implied by "amazed understanding," the presence of a "magnitude of beauty," the preference for marriage and "[t]he thing steady and clear" over transient rapture, and the strong emphasis on paradox in the final line.

With the publication of Gilbert's second collection, *Monolithos: Poems 1962-1982* (1982), this poem took on a new meaning. Things had changed

considerably for Gilbert by then. Unlike other poets, Gilbert hated the attention his first book received; he was always concerned about writing the best poetry he could—with “getting it right,” as he would say—rather than becoming a career poet ensconced in some university. He won the Yale Younger Poets Award only because a friend gave him the form and a stamped addressed envelope to send in with his sheaf of poems. So, when he received a \$5000 Guggenheim Fellowship (again with the help of friends), he disappeared.

It took Gilbert twenty years to reemerge with that second collection, and only then because literary editor and friend Gordon Lish got some of Gilbert’s poems published in *Esquire* and slowly coaxed the rest of the book from the poet, who by then had been living outside of the US, mostly in Greece, for two decades. Even so, only two-thirds of the collection was new: the opening section of the book is a selection from *Views of Jeopardy*, which, two decades later, had become hard to find. Gilbert chose to open *Monolithos*, not with “In Dispraise of Poetry” (which is reprinted), but with “The Abnormal Is Not Courage,” a poem from the middle of *Views of Jeopardy*. Given Gilbert’s flight from fame and choice to live a secluded life in small villages on what were then remote Greek islands—which the poems in *Monolithos* serve to document—“The Abnormal Is Not Courage” came to be read as a manifesto of sorts on Gilbert’s own aesthetic. Thus “The thing steady and clear,” given the lucidity and consistent quality of Gilbert’s work from collection to collection, becomes a reference to the poem itself. And “the normal excellence, of long accomplishment,” can be read as a concise statement of

Gilbert's achievement over sixty years of writing in obscurity. "By repositioning this poem as the lead of his second book," Dan Albergotti notes in "Coming to the End of His Triumph: A Retrospective on Jack Gilbert." "Gilbert seems to be saying, 'This is why I did it.' He needed to get away from extraordinary immediate success in order to cultivate true excellence, that excellence that is more complex, that demands hardship and quiet commitment."

It took Gilbert more than a decade to publish his next book, *The Great Fires: Poems 1982-1992* (1995). By then, the sparseness of his oeuvre and quietness of his accomplishment stood in stark contrast to the legendary status of Ginsberg and the other Beats. In spite of Gilbert's disdain, though, he and the Beats share several common elements: their poetry was born out of a rejection of mainstream American values. Gilbert didn't experiment with hallucinogens or alternative forms of sexuality like the Beats, but he did cultivate an alternative lifestyle, preferring quiet solitude to the boisterous scene at that time. His poetry, like Ginsberg's, is deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition. Ginsberg, for example, spent much of his life studying William Blake—a poet that Gilbert deeply admires as well—often claiming that it was that early Romantic who showed him the interconnectedness of the world. While Gilbert would not accept, as the Beats would, Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," he would agree with Wordsworth that any poem of value must be composed by someone "possessed of more than usual organic sensibility [who has] also thought long and deeply." And while the Beats often pay homage to the

American Romantic Walt Whitman, Gilbert's celebration of solitude and his faith in transcendence through language link him to two other American Romantics, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Both Gilbert and the Beats also have shared roots in Modernism, especially its call for reevaluation of the status quo, its rejection of old values and styles in writing that had gone before, and its reaction against the depersonalizing effect of technology. Though the Beats spoke out against the formalism and elitism of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound was important to such poets as Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley. And William Carlos Williams, whose emphasis on the small, well crafted poem is also central to Gilbert's aesthetic, personally mentored many important Beat figures, including Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov.

But whereas the Beats react against the objective distancing, apolitical stance and focus on craft of Modernism, Gilbert embraces the idea of the poem as a perfectible object and denies that poetry can be an effective vehicle for political expression. He shares the New Critics' preference for the well honed short lyric and rejects the Beat enthusiasm for dadaism and surrealism. And while the poems of his Beat contemporaries are full of America, Gilbert's are filled with Europe—with Paris, Perugia, Santorini and Paros. His primary vehicle became the short, free verse lyric, emphasizing directness and lucidity over the surface complexities of traditional forms as espoused by the New Critics and the New Formalists after them; the expression of important values

and hard earned experiences by a clearly defined speaker over the open-ended interrogation of language of the Postmodernists; and the power of densely compacted brevity over the free wheeling, epic impulse of most Beats.

*The Great Fires* also received several prestigious awards (again primarily through the intercession of a handful of friends and supporters), including a Lannan Literary Award, a Pulitzer Prize nomination and the National Book Critics Award. In spite of, or more likely because of, this acclaim, Gilbert was not persuaded to come back to America, preferring to live outside of the US, frequently with a female companion or in solitude—but not without cost, as “Going Wrong,” the opening poem of his third book suggests:

The fish are dreadful. They are brought up  
the mountain in the dawn most days, beautiful  
and alien and cold from night under the sea,  
the grand rooms fading from their flat eyes.

*Soft machinery of the dark*, the man thinks,  
washing them. “What can you know of my machinery!”  
demands the Lord. *Sure*, the man says quietly  
and cuts into them, laying back the dozen struts,  
getting to the muck of something terrible.

The Lord insists: “You are the one who chooses  
to live this way. I build cities where things  
are human. I make Tuscany and you go to live

with rock and silence." The man washes away  
the blood and arranges the fish on a big plate.  
Starts the onions in the hot olive oil and puts  
in peppers. "You have lived all year without women."  
He takes out everything and puts in the fish.  
"No one knows where you are. People forget you.  
You are vain and stubborn." The man slices  
tomatoes and lemons. Takes out the fish  
and scrambles eggs. *I am not stubborn*, he thinks,  
laying all of it on the table in the courtyard  
full of early sun, shadows of swallows flying  
on the food. *Not stubborn, just greedy.*

In addition to the stylistic elements mentioned earlier, "Going Wrong" contains much that is typical in Gilbert's poetry: a solitary man in a rural, isolated setting, carrying out an activity (preparing food), reflecting on his state of being. Mixing precise observations with reflections by the speaker on himself and the choices he's made, the poem becomes a meditation on the experience of solitude, and in the end an assertion of both the poet's weakness and strength. As Laura Quinney notes in "Jack Gilbert: A House on Fire in Sunlight," "The speaker usually foregrounds his observations and expresses himself with pathos, both of which are balanced by a remarkable crispness of presentation. He isolates the revealing moment, carefully measuring the pace, and expounding the details rigorously. The poet is effectively split between the one who experiences and the one who quizzically



observes. He often writes about himself from the third person. He investigates himself, asking questions and watching himself watch himself. He deduces truths from the life he has in some ways determined, and, in others, chanced to live. By taking himself as an example of significant common experience, he sets about explicating the laws of life as they make themselves manifest in him.”

Along with the familiar themes of solitude, desire for women and the existence of a powerful inner world beyond the mundane, perceivable world (“the grand rooms fading from their flat eyes.”), “Going Wrong” demonstrates Gilbert’s use of concrete imagery—in this case images connected to beasts (fish and sparrows), food and eating, light and darkness (“early sun” and “shadows”) and machinery (“soft machinery of the dark”)—to give his poems density and complexity beneath their seemingly simple surfaces. Combining density with simplicity is exactly what he is after. “Poetry, for me,” Gilbert has written, “is a witnessing to magnitude. It is the art of making urgent values manifest. [...] It is the housing of these values in poems so they will exist with maximum pressure, for the longest time.”

“Going Wrong” also gains power from the ambiguity of both its ending and its title—another typical device of Gilbert’s. The reader is left to ponder when reading the last line what the significance is of the speaker denying God’s assertion that he is stubborn in his willful pursuit of solitude, and the poet’s insistence that it is due to his greed. Both are failings, but each is of a different kind. We usually feel greed for things that give us pleasure, thus

suggesting solitude offers a kind of bounty (implied also in the seeming abundance of the simple meal being prepared) that the speaker cannot resist—a theme that appears elsewhere in Gilbert. That perception, though, is thrown into doubt when the reader reflects back on the title. Who is going wrong, the speaker in his pursuit of greed and denial of God's supposed concern for him? Or God in His mistaken insistence that the speaker is vain and stubborn in preferring rock and silence to the beauty of Tuscany and women? The essential power of the poem is the way it succinctly and vividly expresses both mutually exclusive possibilities, without fully asserting either.

*Monolithos* is dedicated to poet Linda Gregg, Gilbert's companion for eight years, and many of the poems in that book chart the disintegration of that relationship. *The Great Fires* in turn is dedicated to the sculptress Michiko Nogami, Gilbert's companion for eleven years, who died in 1982 of cancer at the age of thirty-six, and some of that collection's best poems express his grief at losing her. A decade later, Gilbert brought out *Refusing Heaven* (2005), which also won a National Book Critics Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, dedicating the collection to both former companions, if for no other reason than that this fourth collection, published in Gilbert's 80<sup>th</sup> year, continues to intently examine his experience of loss connected to these two relationships. One poem from that collection, "Failing and Flying," has been seen by some critics as yet another statement on Gilbert's "career" as a poet. More explicitly, though, it looks at the "failure" of the poet's relationship with Gregg, and in the process exhibits many of the characteristics that make Gilbert one of the most important lyric poets writing in English today:

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.

It's the same when love comes to an end,  
or the marriage fails and people say  
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody  
said it would never work. That she was  
old enough to know better. But anything  
worth doing is worth doing badly.

Like being there by that summer ocean  
on the other side of the island while  
love was fading out of her, the stars  
burning so extravagantly those nights that  
anyone could tell you they would never last.

Every morning she was asleep in my bed  
like a visitation, the gentleness in her  
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.

Each afternoon I watched her coming back  
through the hot stony field after swimming,  
the sea light behind her and the huge sky  
on the other side of that. Listened to her  
while we ate lunch. How can they say  
the marriage failed? Like the people who  
came back from Provence (when it was Provence)  
and said it was pretty but the food was greasy.

I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,

but just coming to the end of his triumph.

Gilbert's strategy of combining narrative and argumentation to move the poem along has already been noted, as has his reliance on paradox to express the complexity of experience, in this case loss. In poem after poem, the poet unflinchingly examines, relives and reflects upon the loss of Linda and Michiko. "Failing and Falling" shows the "triumph" of the speaker in having experienced the relationship with Gregg; in contrast "Finding Something" portrays with characteristic directness the dying of Michiko:

Michiko is dying in the house behind me,  
the long windows open so I can hear  
the faint sound she will make when she wants  
watermelon to suck or so I can take her  
to a bucket in the center of the high-celinged room  
which is the best we can do for a chamber pot.  
She will lean against my leg as she sits  
so as not to fall over in her weakness.  
How strange and fine to get so near to it.  
The arches of her feet are like voices  
of children calling in the grove of lemon trees,  
where my heart is as helpless as crushed birds.

Several other poems in *Refusing Heaven* also take the reader deep into the experience of bereavement. In "Highlights and Interstices," the poet misses,

not the exceptional moments, the “sorrows,” “vacations, and emergencies,” not the “uncommon parts,” but the moments when nothing was happening: “What I miss about / her is that commonplace I can no longer remember.” If something can be remembered, in Gilbert’s vision, then it is not really lost. But, again, true to the polarities that, for Gilbert, mark out existence, finding one miniscule, concrete item that the deceased has left behind, in this poem “a long black hair tangled in the dirt [of a repotted plant],” helps keep her memory alive.” Grief, because of its purity and intensity, has magnitude and therefore must be felt fully, rather than avoided. In “Moreover” he makes this clear: “We lose everything, but make harvest / of the consequences it was to us.” Throughout his work, Gilbert is constantly reminding us that not only is it in spite of suffering, but also because of suffering, that we must love life: “If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, / we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.”

“Failing and Flying,” along with many other poems in *Refusing Heaven*, also suggests the importance of classical mythology for Gilbert’s and the significance of Greece. “At the end of the poem,” Dan Albergotti observes, “Gilbert makes an assertion that I cannot help reading in the context of his refusal of literary stardom and his embracing of obscurity and poverty.” In this sense Gilbert is using mythology, suggested as well in “The Abnormal Is Not Courage,” as a subtle form of self reference. Gilbert is certainly not hesitant to invoke mythological figures to imply attributes of his aesthetical approach. Orpheus, for example, speaks for the poet on several occasions: in “Orpheus in Greenwich Village,” an early poem clearly referring to the Beats, the poet

asks, "What if Orpheus, / confident in the hard- / formed mastery / should go down to Hell? / [...] And then, surrounded by the closing beasts / and readying his lyre / should notice suddenly / that they had no ears?" And an aging Orpheus in "Finding Eurydice," despite the fact that "[n]obody listens, [...]" sings because / that is what he does." In "Bring in the Gods," Gilbert, while being interrogated by the gods, identifies his primary perspective as a lyric poet: "I stand on top of myself like a hilltop and my life / is spread out before me." In "I Imagine the Gods," the gods offer to give the speaker anything he wants. "Think, they say, we could / make you famous again." But Gilbert, as he did in his youth, chooses intensity of experience over fame: "Let me fall / in love one last time, I beg them. / Teach me mortality, frighten me / into the present. Help me to find / the heft of these days. That the nights / will be full enough and my heart feral."

Through mythology, Gilbert expresses the archetypal values that are essential to his lyric sensibility. One of these values is beauty. In *Monolithos*, Helen can be seen "washing her breasts / in the Turkish morning," while in *The Dance Most of All*, published almost 30 years later, the poet is with the "grey-haired men of Ilium" waiting "each morning for Helen / to cross over to the temple in her light raiment. / The waning men longing to escape from the spell." In "Translation Into the Original" Gilbert expresses his preference for the values represented by Apollo over those of Dionysius, whose "violent indifference [...] makes nothing live." In contrast, Apollo can be seen as having attributes the poet himself aspires to: "God of dance and lover of mortal women. Homer said he / is fierce. His coming like the swift coming of

night. / That the gods feel fear and awe in the presence / of this law-giver,  
explainer of the rules of death. [...] Awful Apollo stands in the brilliant fields, /  
watching the wind change the olive trees. / He comes back through the dark  
singing / so quietly that you can hear nothing.”

Figures such as Orpheus, Icarus, Helen, Penelope and Apollo appear in  
Gilbert’s poems, not as readymade props for some prefabricated emotion, but  
as representatives of values portrayed in narratives played out most often in  
the Greek landscape, where many of Gilbert’s poems are set. Such  
references are never simply announced, and are combined with visceral  
imagery of rural, island Greece, connecting some essential aspect of the  
poem to a larger, enduring narrative, while turning that narrative, as “Failing  
and Falling” does, in a way that gives the reader a new perspective on the  
myth. The presence of archetypal figures presented in a contemporary  
setting, and the compelling way the lyrical voice of the poem combines the  
mythological with the personal as a means to come to terms with hard earned  
experience and reach significant truths are essential features of Gilbert’s  
project as a poet.

Critics of Gilbert’s work, such as Helen Vendler, liken his vision to that of the  
Beats, belittling it, like theirs, for being inflected with “romantic primitivism” and  
dismissing it as sentimental, obvious and thin. Feminists criticize him for  
portraying women as “totem creatures of mystery and beauty.” Still others,  
primarily the Postmodernists, berate him for speaking in his poems through a  
“talking ego,” a “smug voice that condescends to hand down universal truths

to us.” But such criticism fails to take into account that Gilbert is working in the lyric mode, which, in the Western tradition, stretches back to 7<sup>th</sup> century BC Greece. In this regard his short, dense, meditative, often erotic poems have a closer kinship to Sappho than to many of his experimentalist and academic contemporaries. As can be seen in “Going Wrong” and “Failing and Flying,” Gilbert’s connection to Greece is not simply intellectual. Having lived in island Greece on and off for much of his adult life, his feel for Greece is intimate, immediate and visceral, even if limited to a kind of rural life that exists less and less.

In Gilbert’s poems that invoke Greece, the speaker is usually walking or sitting, or engaged in some simple activity most often connected with the basic acts of survival, planting a garden, pulling water from a well, cutting tomatoes for a salad. Whatever happens, happens out of necessity—and thus has a kind of purity, since it occurs amidst a severe, demanding landscape. Even pleasures are severe. Each moment is seemingly lived with intensity, whatever one’s emotional state. And amid the power of this elemental world, emotions are stripped to essentials as well. “Reality,” the speaker says in “Music Is in the Piano Only When It Is Played,” “is not what we marry as a feeling. It is what / walks up the dirt path, through the excessive heat / and giant sky, the sea stretching away.” And in “A Year Later,” realizing that, after eight years, “the marriage is almost over,” the speaker says, “They did not know / this would happen when they came, just the two / of them and the silence. A purity that looked / like beauty and was too difficult for people.”



While Greece is essentially a state of mind to the poet ("We try to visit Greece," he says in "Exceeding," "and find ourselves instead in the pointless noon / standing among the vetch and grapes [...]"), it still has a reality of its own he cannot ignore. It is a place where Gilbert has returned time and again, seeking out solitude. In poem after poem, the poet reflects on that solitude, using elements of the Greek landscape as concrete points of reference: So he writes, "Loneliness, they report, is a man's fate. / A man's fate, said Heraclitus, is a man's character. / I sit masturbating in the moonlight, / trying to find means for all of it. / The sea collapses, again and again, faintly behind me. / I walk down the dirt road, touch the cold Aegean, / and come back slowly. My hand drying in the night air." While on occasion the poet can wonder about "his happiness in this wrong terrain," he can also feel so detached from intimacy that he will put a bucket in the well at night so he can "feel something down there / tug at the other end of the rope."

At other moments the speaker contemplates the other people he comes into contact with, contrasting his condition with theirs. In "Resume," though the poet is spending Easter with the locals, it's his difference from them that the poem emphasizes: "The hanging goat roasted / with lemon, pepper and thyme. The American hacks off / the last of the meat, gets out the remaining / handfuls from the spine. Grease up to the elbows, / his face smeared and his heart blooming. The satisfied / farmers watch his fervor with surprise." When the meal is over, he "makes his way down / the trails. Down from that holiday energy / to the silence of his real life, where he will / wash in cold water by kerosene light, happy / and alone."

This year Gilbert, at the age of 84, has come out with his most recent book. In reviewing what may well be, because of ill health, Gilbert's final collection, John Repp writes that *The Dance Most of All* "extends and deepens his decades-long exploration of characteristic themes and subject matter: the nobility of love, sexual desire and grief; his years of chosen poverty in Greece and elsewhere; his Depression-era Pittsburgh childhood; the wonder of performing the simple tasks that keep us going. Almost entirely free of metaphors, the poems rely on direct statement, [...] and never succumb to nostalgia or sentimentality." "Waiting and Finding" exemplifies many of the characteristics Repp describes:

While he was in kindergarten, everybody wanted to play the tom-toms when it came time for that. You had to run in order to get there first, and he would not. So he always had a triangle. He does not remember how they played the tom-toms, but he sees clearly their Chinese look. Red with dragons front and back and gold studs around that held the drumhead tight. If you had a triangle, you didn't really make music. You mostly waited while the tambourines and tom-toms went on a long time. Until there was a signal for all triangle people to hit them the right way. Usually once. Then it was tom-toms and waiting some more. But what he remembers is the sound of the triangle. A perfect,

shimmering sound that has lasted all his long life.

Fading out and coming again after a while. Getting lost and the waiting for it to come again. Waiting meaning without things. Meaning love sometimes dying out, sometimes being taken away. Meaning that often he lives silent in the middle of the world's music. Waiting for the best to come again. Beginning to hear the silence as he waits. Beginning to like the silence maybe too much.

Even as a child, the poem implies, the speaker was different from others, in both his preferences and actions, choosing not to run for the tom-toms as the other children did, and preferring an instrument that most of the time remains silent. More central to this particular poem is the theme of aging. As with other types of experience, Gilbert closely scrutinizes his growing old. In "Refusing Heaven," he likens his elder state to "an old ferry dragged to the shore, / a home in its smashed grandeur, with the giant beams / and joists. Like a wooden ocean out of control. / A beached heart. A cauldron of cooling melt." And in "More Than Sixty," the poet observes that at that age he is "[o]ut of money [...] sitting in the shade / of my farmhouse cleaning the lentils [...]." But, as with all types of experience, aging for Gilbert is dual, bringing both loss and gain. So, by the end of "More Than Sixty," as if the act of reflection brings it about, the poet's attitude changes as he looks far down the valley and discovers "the sea / exactly the same blue I used to paint it / with my watercolors as a child. / So what, I think happily. So what!"

One of the blessings of his declining years for Gilbert is the ability to see one's life more fully:

[I]n our youth and for a long time after our youth we cannot see our lives. Because we are inside of that. Because we can see no shape to it because we have nothing to compare it to. We have not seen it grow and change because we are too close. We don't know the names of things that would bind them to us, so we cannot feed on them.

In "Ruins and Wabi," he says more succinctly, "It takes a long time to get the ruins right." Gilbert, throughout his body of work, wonders what aging and death will be like, musing on the new states of awareness he perceives as he grows older, and marveling at the powerful emotions he continues to feel. In "Ambition" knowledge of death seems to bring the speaker to a new phase in his self understanding: "Having reached the beginning, starting toward / a new ignorance," so that the poet, "[s]itting with his poems at a small table," thinks of death "with pleasure, / trailing his hand in the river he will / turn into." We think because we are in the terrain of old age that we must be in the realm of elegy, but no, we are in the realm of paradox. In these final poems, as we have seen at the end of "Waiting and Finding," death, the ultimate loss, becomes for the speaker something inviting: "Beginning to hear the silence / as he waits. Beginning to like the silence / maybe too much."

Looking back over the singular trajectory of Gilbert's "career," it's clear that for five decades now he has been held aloft as a writer—not by a desire for wealth and fame—but by his faith in the transcendental power of language. More like Daedalus than Icarus, he has emphasized craft while doing his best with the material at hand. In one of his later poems, harkening back to his time with the Beats, the poet recalls: "Ginsberg came to my house one afternoon and said he was giving up poetry / because it told lies, because language distorts. / I agreed but asked what we have / that gets it right even that much." Getting poetry right for Gilbert means probing one's experience deeply and focusing on what is truly important instead of dabbling in surface complexities and linguistic puzzles. "Some of them are ingenious," Gilbert says of contemporary experimental and academic poets in a 2005 interview in the *Paris Review*, "more ingenious than I am, but [...] I don't understand where the meat is. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this kind of poetry. It won't change my life,"

"Ezra Pound said 'Make it new,'" Gilbert comments elsewhere in that same interview, "The great tragedy of that saying is he left out the essential word. It should be *importantly* new." Poems that aren't after something important aren't for Gilbert really poems. Nor is writing that doesn't attend to craft, which is his primary disagreement with the Beats. Laurel Maury quotes the poet in "From a Surviving Beat: Moments of Everyday Glory": "The Beat poets, the Black Mountain people, and the New York group are generally self-indulgent. All but the very best [...] produce a flood of trivial poems that don't even have the excuse of technical finish. If the academic poets often

seem to be doing something very well that isn't worth doing at all, these others tend to deal with matters of real importance with slovenliness." What essentially defines a poem for him is its emotional expressiveness: "When I read the poems that matter to me," the poet explains, "it stuns me how much the presence of the heart—in all its forms—is endlessly available there. To experience ourselves in an important way knocks me out. It puzzles me why people have given that up for cleverness."

Also essential to Gilbert's aesthetic is getting one's life right. As Jack Spicer, one of Gilbert's teachers in his San Francisco days, would emphasize, "The writing of poetry, essentially, is something which you really can't say anything about except that if you violate something deep inside you—maybe even something that you didn't know was deep inside you—you're lost," a lesson Gilbert took to heart. What Gilbert was never willing to violate—even if he had to turn his back on comfort and acclaim—was his impulse for living the kind of life that gave him maximum access to the deeper realms of self and experience, which meant spending a significant amount of time in solitude. When asked at a 1996 reading about his long disappearance from the literary scene, Gilbert said simply that he was "falling in love" with Linda and with Michiko. "In fact, what he was doing," asserts Dan Albergotti, "was living a real life, far from the artificialities of American literary culture—living deeply and feeling the heft of his heart and soul." And in the process putting together a slender yet powerful body of work, one that would reawaken in us the possibility of something akin to what Icarus dreamed of—transcendence in this world.

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January 14, 2010