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The metaphysics of Richard Wilbur

by [Daniel Mark Epstein](#)

Does society appreciate one of its finest metaphysical poets?

During World War II the Allied forces in Europe had trouble maintaining a staff of cryptographers. There were few who could do the difficult work of deciphering enemy codes. Some got killed and others cracked up under the pressure of constant shelling and sleep deprivation.

Two who survived with their wits intact were Willard Van Orman Quine (1908–2000), whom many consider the most influential American philosopher of the late twentieth century, and Richard Wilbur (born 1921), the lyric poet. In 1950 they found themselves sitting across the table from each other in the dining room of the Harvard Society of Fellows. The philosopher had distinguished himself by deciphering German submarine codes. Quine, a Senior Fellow, was obsessed with maps and spoke of obscure islands and canyons. As the Senior Fellow talked on, the Junior Fellow listened.

They did not discuss the war in those comfort ...

Daniel Mark Epstein wrote the libretto for the opera *Jefferson and Poe*, with music by Damon Ferrante.

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