

# A Livable Temple

Greg Harris

*THE TEMPLE OF ICONOCLASTS*

J. Rodolfo Wilcock

Translated by Lawrence Venuti

Mercury House

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J. Rodolfo Wilcock, author, translator, and raconteur on the Italian arts scene, is perfectly poised for discovery in America. Utterly unknown here, he cuts just the right sort of marginal figure to make him a literary underdog, sure to be filed among the ranks of the Robert Walsers, the Raymond Roussels, the Clarice Lispectors—writers who have won devoted followings, but who have remained in the lush margins thanks to their generous iconoclasm.

That iconoclasm has as much to do with why Wilcock has not been translated previously as it does with why he is a prime candidate for literary stardom now. Lawrence Venuti and Mercury House have set the stage for such stardom with the release of *The Temple of Iconoclasts*. Wilcock's oeuvre as a whole is highly experimental, as freewheeling and fun as it is dark and disturbing, and freely flaunts its anarchic attitudes toward sexuality, society, and literature. Students of gay literature would do well to revel in this anarchism, and the wide range of influences in his work makes it fertile ground for any student of multiculturalism. For the rest of us not in the academic world, he stands somewhere between Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, but in the shadows where the fantastic cannot always save: Wilcock's world is dark, but the carnival lights of the

true *fantasist* are just visible from where he is standing.

Born in Buenos Aires to an English father and an Italian mother, he wrote his early works in Spanish and his later works in Italian. His name alone contains all the multiplicity of his upbringing: the "J" stands for the Spanish Juan, Rodolfo is decidedly Italian, and Wilcock is about as properly English as a name can get. He was a compatriot of Borges, Silvina Ocampo, and Adolfo Bioy Cesares, and later, when in opposition to the Peron dictatorship he exiled himself to Italy (where he died in 1978), he fraternized with the likes of Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. He surrounded himself with the brightest lights among his contemporaries, all the while remaining little known himself outside the languages he wrote in. (In this he can be likened to Blaise Cendrars, that most mercurial and elusive of twentieth-century writers.) For one man to show up in so many important biographies suggests he must have had a generous amount of talent. *The Temple of Iconoclasts*, the first of his works to be made available in English, confirms his status as one among the many luminaries of mid-twentieth-century Europe.

The book is constructed as a series of biographical entries drawn from throughout history, detailing the nefarious careers and obsessions of the "iconoclasts," men who stand apart from society in their utopic visions of it. There are scientists, artists, politicians, belles-lettrists, theoreticians, and lonely cranks of all kinds. Some of the biographies are true, while others are the product of Wilcock's fertile imagination. The one thing all 35 biographies have in common is that they detail the lives of men



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who, in their attempts to see their ideals come to light in the world, eventually destroy the world they sought to inhabit. Sometimes they destroy entire races, topographies, or institutions, but more typically they just destroy themselves, their ideals going with them. As a whole, the book is a startling vision of the capacity of humankind to destroy precisely when it means to create, a paean to the misguided revolutionary.

*The Temple of Iconoclasts*, then, is Wilcock's warning to a world rife with visionaries who believe their own ideals are right for all humanity. For while it is the outrageous and the insane—the David Koreshes, the Hitlers, the Haile Selassies—who seek to actualize their vision of the world in the world, it is they who obviously make it a place we cannot inhabit. The more benign visions of a Marx, a Godel, or a Martin Luther seek to hand us a utopia that, in the end, is just as unlivable. Whichever—benign or malignant, solitary or imperialist, fictional or based in reality—it is clear that we are not meant to live in the rarefied air of our own ideas. The harmless meanderings of

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the solitary crank and the vision of an ethnically pure world by the man who has real power are not that different. The answer lies in releasing humanity from any totalitarianism of the mind or body.

The styles of the short-story-like pieces range from heavy technical difficulty, as in a scientific journal, to the lightness of the prose in one of Borges's *ficciones*, complete with the euphoric endnote which characterizes them. However, Wilcock is a writer who can stand alone with no comparisons. In *The Temple of Iconoclasts*, he emerges as a prose stylist of amazing variety, as capable of delivering a devastating blow to the senses as he is of creating passages that lilt and travel at the speed of light. Lawrence Venuti proves himself once again to be a masterful translator from Italian, handling the shifts in style with the assured grace he displayed in his previous translations of I.U. Tarchetti.

Mercury House has done a great service offering this work to the English-speaking world, introducing us to a writer we may happily add to the list of great twentieth-century iconoclasts, writers whose visions of our world are not only livable, but which render it that much more pleasurable.

*Greg Harris is a writer. He lives in Bloomington, Illinois. He waits. He is currently writing his first play.*