The World is as Sharp as a Knife: Vision and Image in the Work of Wilson Duff*

ROBIN RIDINGTON

The World is as Sharp as a Knife

There are no laws,
which you can trust to work.
There are just rules,
which you must make to work.

In the one hand,
you are holding the mirror.

On the other hand
you are the mask.

Put on the mask and look in the mirror.
What you see
(the mirror does not lie)
is that which is common to both,
the truth you can believe.

WILSON DUFF

Wilson Duff was possessed by the power of native Northwest Coast visual imagery. Both personally and professionally he struggled to find just the right words to represent the vision of his mind's eye. He was meticulous in his choice of words, but often agonized over the task of communicating in a formal academic writing style. Although never at a loss for words, he found the conventions of academic argument limiting for his purpose.

In the introduction to *Images Stone B.C.* he described his task as "anthropology with a great deal of artistic license". He went on to say:

The question I must ask is "what do the images mean?" and it is a question that demands answers in words, the language of thinking. It is a hazardous enterprise for one who values a reputation for scholarly discipline, because

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of course we do not really "know" what they "mean". It would be difficult enough — and terribly disconcerting — to explain what the images of our own culture "mean", because most of their meanings, most of the time, are left below or beyond the view of ordinary waking consciousness. It is doubly difficult to explain the images of a different culture, whose unspoken visions and premises we may not share. Not having the answers, and not even sure how to ask the questions, I am being presumptuous in saying anything at all about other peoples' symbols. But I think it is a risk worth taking, because it is being taken in an attempt to burst the chains of a long felt frustration, a frustration which I am not alone in feeling. (Duff 1975; 12)

Wilson was an artist in his use of words and he recognized his own artistic sensibility in the symbolic relationships of Northwest Coast imagery. To him, an artistic image represented the creative thinking of the human imagination rather than a particular natural or social fact. He saw art as relationships held in the mind rather than as objects held in the hand. Images "are ways of thinking, in the guise of ways of seeing."

Images Stone B.C. is a book of images and imagination. It conveys equally qualities of thinking and seeing. The book reproduces in word and picture three millenia of stone sculpture in the place that is now British Columbia. The stone objects themselves were brought together for exhibition during 1975 and 1976 and were photographed by Hilary Stewart. In the book, a catalogue of the show, Wilson set himself the task of finding words to represent the meaning of the images frozen in stone out of another time. While remaining anthropological, the language of expression Wilson used is artistic and poetic rather than strictly academic. In his writing, Wilson did not abandon anthropology but rather expanded it. Like the thought that his writing expressed, his choice of words was both elegantly concise and disturbingly suggestive. Although printed as prose, the text of *Images Stone B.C.* is really a book of poetry. Tragically, the very suggestive impact of his writing has been held by some readers to be a form of academic licence rather than, as Wilson clearly stated, an intentional artistic licence. Wilson knew what he was doing and he took the risk of writing and thinking as he thought the artistic creators of the images thought themselves. In his words, "I think it is a risk worth taking."

Wilson's words were placed with care and attention. The simplicity of their articulation belied the hard work and hard thought that he put into his every communication. He began *Images Stone B.C.* with a vision of the artistic imagination:

Images seem to speak to the eye, but they are really addressed to the mind. They are always thinking, in the guise of ways of seeing. The eye can some-

times be satisfied with the form alone, but the mind can only be satisfied with meaning, which can be contemplated, more consciously or less, after the eye is closed. (Duff 1975; 12)

The relationships his words expressed stood for relationships preserved in the stone images. They reflect some of the stark objectivity and monumental permanence of the stone medium itself. Stone, he said, is

a medium for blunt statements, threshold statements, even ambiguous statements — stone is about life and death. Stone is about time. If a club could be devised to kill death, it would be made of stone. If a design could be devised to thwart time, it would exist in stone. (Duff 1975; 17-18)

Images Stone B.C. is literally bound between the images of two stone Tsimshian masks. On the front cover is a dreaming eyeless outer mask; on the back cover, its inner mate stares out at us with eye shafts drilled through the stone face to admit the passage of light when light is upon it. Together, they were to Wilson a powerful instrument resolving the opposition of seeing and feeling. They were:

Two kinds of contemplation: the one "eyes open", the other, "eyes closed". One sees how it is to be human. The other feels how it is to be human. They are twin stone faces, recognizing each other in each other. (Duff 1975; 20). The eyes on the masks are winking at each other. They see that Time is not so much a problem as a necessary part of the pattern. They see the adversary not as an enemy, but as a partner, and as a twin. (Duff 1975; 22)

The exhibition of stone images began and ended in its appointed time, but Wilson's imagination could not be contained by its vessel. He continued to write about masks and images in a series of as yet unpublished poems and "Notes to Myself", begun 31 July 1975. Torn between academic anthropology and art, this private communication with his inner self gave Wilson's creative intelligence the artistic licence he could not obtain from anthropology. The block he felt in writing for other people disappeared when he began to write down "the things I dare to think Myself". In and among this work, some of which is incomplete and certainly not intended for publication, is to be found a continuation of the message begun in *Images Stone B.C.* The twin masks that bound the book together also bind together the imagination of this work. In a piece whimsically entitled "It is all a Duff Rorschach", he wrote: "The perfect relationship is the pair of eyes. Each is twin, one, both. The ultimate symbol is the one eye that is both."

The perfect relationship was ever in his mind's eye. He saw each pair of eyes resolve into the image of a single mind and he saw each pair of

minds converge upon what he called singular images. He saw his own mind as one of a pair, the other being the mind of the person, in whatever time or place, who shares his vision of a singular image. The two stone masks were to Wilson a perfect instrument for the resolution of the perfect relationship. Freed of the constraints of a concern for his "reputation for scholarly discipline", and yet in full possession of that discipline as he had long ago internalized and come to terms with it in his own mind, Wilson set out to explore the conceptual possibilities of the instrument he had found in the masks. He defiantly reflected on this adventure in the following characteristically aphoristic and paradoxical poem.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING
AS GOING TOO FAR

Stone images
are
always
hard to see.

The only thing they really, really mean
is everything they only seem to mean.

Wilson's mind leapt from the stone faces as objects in a museum collection to their meaning as systems of thought. He lived a large part of his life in a world ordered by the fierce abstraction of the singular images he found in Northwest Coast art. Like the shaman, possessed in his personal life by the power of transformation, Wilson was taken almost involuntarily on a journey in search of the "perfect relationship", the "one eye that is both". In *Images Stone B.C.*, he said:

The meaning (of an image) is in the relationships being expressed. The marriage of image and artifact creates a metaphor. A metaphor is a form of equation. An equation is a kind of proverb, whose meanings ripple out in resonating circles of relevant analogy to the limits of the mind. A stone image can be a chunk of truth. (Duff 1975; 16)

In his poetry and notes, Wilson explored without constraint his own relationship to the equation of the masks. In their image, he came to see his own vision. In his vision, their image came to be a reflection of his own. He confided this intense relationship to himself in a poem entitled "You will not go down twice to the same river."

"You will not go down twice to the same river." (Heraclitus)

I am the river,
flowing,
both ways at once.
This brief moment, my life, is
one going to the river,
one cupful of water.

I am the thirst.
I drink.

I am the wheel,
turning,
both ways at once.
This brief moment, my life, is
one touching of my rim to earth,
as I journey.

Who feels that sensuous touch?
I.

I am the eye,
gazing,
into itself.
This brief moment, my life, is
one glint of recognition.

It comforts me.
I turn my gaze to the river.

In going over the notes and poetry I found there were two versions of this poem. The second was identical to the first except that for "I" it read "you" and in the line "Who feels that sensuous touch" he had omitted the word "sensuous". In the subtle transformation of pronouns in this pair of poems, Wilson is restating the equation given by Raven's grandfather to Raven in one of the Haida creation myths and brought to mind by Wilson as the next to the last sentence in *Images Stone B.C.* The equation is: "I am you. That is You." (Duff 1975; 166) It is as penetrating as Raven's beak, as pungent as his favourite Haida aphorism, "The world is as sharp as a knife", which guarded the door to his office at UBC. The twin stone masks, reflecting the twin human qualities of "seeing" and "feeling", were a statement in stone about self recognition, Raven's grandfather's equation. He played with this equation in his own aphorisms. On one page of his notes are written the following three, at the top, middle and bottom of the pages:

Smooth
is a way of being
soft
and hard
at the same time

The stone eye that never closes
remains awake through its own death.

You can have it both ways
if only you will be content with halfs.

In *Images Stone B.C.*, he said of the masks,

The toughness of stone yielded to the mastery of the artist two likenesses of the same visage, which may have been an idealized image of himself. But the one has eyes that have never opened, the other has eyes that can never close. The one sees only inward and backward, the other sees only outward and forward. These eyes, being of stone, are exempt from the usual alternations of mortal eyes: blinking, sleeping, closing for contemplation or for death. Think more about the open, perfect-circle eyes of the "sighted twin" from Metlakatla and Paris. It is not that they have "opened" or "wakened", for they have no lids for such a purpose. Their vision is of a purer kind, eternally open to the outside light. Now think more about the unopen eyes of the "unsighted twin" from Kitkatla and Ottawa. It is not that they have "closed" for sleep or contemplation, for they have no lids for such a purpose. Nor are they the eyes of death, for Northwest Coast artists had different ways of depicting dead eyes, and also these are eyes on a living face, the same face as the "sighted twin". It is that their kind of vision is of a purer kind, eternally open to the inner light. The Tsimshian artist has shown the two to be as alike as twins, and as separate: outer vision and inner vision, sight and memory, seeing and imagining. He has shown the two in the act of self recognition, both equally masks, both equally mirrors. (Duff 1975; 165)

Wilson Duff was anthropologist, artist, poet, philosopher. His life was in some ways like that of a shaman possessed with the power of metaphoric relationship. Like the shaman and like the stone masks themselves he saw not with just two eyes, but with a pair of eyes. He both saw and felt more intensely than those around him and like a shaman or a poet, he sought to resolve these two qualities of perception into a single image; a singular image. "The perfect relationship is the pair of eyes. Each is twin, one, both. The ultimate symbol is the one eye that is both." In the twin stone masks he found the "perfect relationship" that was a perfect image of his personal vision. The two masks had been found separately and led different lives since their entry into the white man's world. The one with

eyes that never opened had gone to Ottawa, and the inner twin with eyes that never closed had gone to Paris.

Wilson flew in person to Paris to take possession of the inner half of the pair for the show. He became the instrument of reunification for these images out of a culture foreign to most of us living now in British Columbia. In bringing together the two paired images, he brought into being the perfect relationship of his vision. In the two stone masks he saw his own reflection. On 10 March 1975, soon after returning from Paris with the "sighted twin", he wrote the following poem declaring his relationship to this reflection. To the poet, the author and the actor with which he identified himself, he might have added the shaman, whose vision is never either here nor there but always somewhere in between. In aphorism, he said, "You can have it both ways, if only you will be content with halfs", but like the poet, author, actor and shaman that he was, he yearned for the singular image of a completed whole.

THE MASK IN THE MIRROR

That lonely man of art, the poet,
keeps tossing his pebbles shaped of metaphor
into the pond of analogy,
delighting in the perfect circles he has caused to form,
then closing his eyes to watch the ripples spread
all the way across, and back.
It is the restless lapping on the banks
that feels so good,
so . . . absolute.

That lonely man of myth, the author,
keeps tossing his pebbles shaped of parable
into the sea of experience,
delighting in the perfect circles he has caused to form,
then closing his eyes to let the wavelets travel
all the way across, and back.
It is the restless pounding of the surf
that sounds so reassuring
through the night.

That lonely man of ritual, the actor,
keeps tossing his pebbles shaped of pantomime
into the ocean of the audience,
delighting in the perfect circles he has caused to form,
then closing his eyes to let the recognition spread
all the way across, and back.

It is the restless echoing of laughter
that makes him feel convinced
he's not alone.

That lonely, self-masked figure
can't stop peering in his mirror
and takes what little comfort he can find
from shaping pebbles
into self-portraits.

Perhaps because he had long ago internalized the ethnographic context of Tsimshian masking, Wilson took in the masks at the level of reflective imagination. He knew them to be an instrument of reflection and in viewing them he saw himself; not someone from another time, place and culture. He carried the necessarily reflexive quality of the anthropological perspective to its logical conclusion, and took upon himself the task of messenger between cultures and subjectivities. Like the shaman, his mind flew between worlds, bearing meanings from one subjective world to another.

In seeing himself in the twin images of the masks he also saw another mind with which he was in communication. In receiving the message of the masks he felt compelled, like the shaman, to pass it on to other minds in completion of a circle of information. His poems and prose reflect an awareness of his role as messenger in a flow of meanings between minds. Raven's grandfather's equation articulates a circle of connection between artifact and image in the minds of sender and receiver. In the singularity of their images, the distinction between subject and object resolves into "the ultimate symbol — the one eye that is both". The masks become a mirror telling us: "I am you. That is you." Wilson wrote:

A message is a gift
of meaning.
Communication, part of every message
is part of every gift.
Communication is the essence of gift.
The purest gift is pure communication:
the gift of sight.

Let me show you how to see
it my way.
Show me how to see
it your way.

A message sent and received
is a mutual gift of meaning.

> The least message sent and received
> is the whole mutual gift of life.

Wilson faithfully carried out the terms of Raven's grandfather's equation in his presentation of the twin masks to us. Through their eyes (the perfect relationship is a pair of eyes) and through the eyes of Wilson Duff, we come to see their meaning as our own. Their message and that of the poet-anthropologist who gave us his vision of them is "a gift of meaning". "A message sent and received is a mutual gift of meaning." In receiving his gift we reciprocate it to his memory. Wilson left us with instructions for thinking about the equation of the masks in a poem. I wish to pass them on to you.

> A mask is a self-made mirror.
> Let me help you to make one for you.
> Take the inner stone mask,
> turn it upside down and backwards,
> use it as a vessel for water
> in which you can see your reflection.
> The water runs out the eyes?
> Stop them up,
> but not by plugging the holes,
> not by destroying her sight.
> Do it by putting her in a container
> that can hold as much as she can,
> that can hold everything she can see:
> the outer mask.
> Now fill them with water,
> let it find its level,
> and use it as your mirror.
> Gaze into the water,
> gaze at your reflection,
> think about your mirror,
> think about your mask,
> and think about the one who made it for you.

"The mirror does not lie. In the one hand, you are holding the mirror. On the other hand, you are the mask." We are told to wear the mask as a mirror of our own experience. Any two people are a pair of eyes seeking an image of the perfect relationship in the space between them. The inside of the outer mask is a container in which you can see your reflection. The outside of the inner mask releases the reflecting water through her eyes. Only Wilson was possessed of the vision to turn his images upside down and backward. Only Wilson had the inner confidence to perform the experiment. Only those who recognize his artistic imagination receive

the mutual gift of meaning. To wear the masks you must get inside them. Wilson quite literally thought to look inside them for their inner meaning. Just as one is inside the other, Wilson saw his own reflection inside the two of them together. Together the two masks are a complete system of thought; a singular image of the one eye that is both. Together they remain incomplete until they are brought together with their mutual complement, the human face that wears them. The other pair of eyes required to complete the equation are your own. Wilson spoke directly to our own imaginations. Our vision is required to complete the image he placed before them. Together his eyes, now closed, and our own eyes which remain open, bring the meaning of the masks to life.

Wilson's writing was precisely suggestive in faithful reflection of the precise suggestion of the images that possessed him. His did not abandon anthropology for poetry but rather brought the poet's creative imagination to bear upon an anthropological reality that he already knew well. Although the words he left with us were few, they were well chosen to show us the way into an anthropology that translates one culture's symbolic expression into that of our own. A poem dated 30 November 1974 gives us a metaphor for the relationship between another culture's meaning and our own experience.

Lay down together
two pieces of wood
in the fireplace.
They burn together,
each beside the other,
reflecting
each other's heat
enough to make a fire,
a dance of flame,
which is the purpose.

In the morning,
two charred shells,
A space between,
just enough space,
a slightly twisting space
reflecting the shape of growth
to reach the sun,
and gather in the light
and warmth, . . .
and cold white ash between,
which is the result.

One partner in the Dance
is Time.
The other,
wood's Wish to burn.

Our own culture and that of the people we study as anthropologists are like two pieces of wood in a fireplace. They burn together, each beside the other, reflecting each other's heat enough to make a fire, a dance of flame, which is the purpose. A space exists between them, just enough space, a slightly twisting space, to reflect the shape of their growth to reach the sun and gather in the light and warmth. One partner in the Dance is Time; the other, Imagination's wish to burn.

REFERENCE CITED:

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