

A READING OF ANNE WILKINSON

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WHEN I HEARD last spring of the death of Anne Wilkinson I read once again, and at a single sitting, all the poems she had written — her first small collection *Counterpoint to Sleep* published just ten years ago, the volume of 1955 *The Hangman Ties the Holly*, her three lyric sequences in *The Tamarack Review* numbers 5 and 18, and an as yet unpublished typescript of pieces written mostly in the last year of her life.

I seemed to be reading them for the first time. And I read with a newly sharpened awareness of small, immensely significant details of imagery, music, language, and emotion. There is a stanza of Emily Dickinson which describes the strange clarification brought about by death, and it kept running in my head as a sort of counterpoint to what I was reading:

We noticed smallest things,
Things overlooked before,
By this great light upon our minds
Italicized, as it 'twere.

I could not help thinking how well these lines applied not only to my own state of mind but to one of the special qualities and peculiar virtues of Anne Wilkinson's poems — their being saturated, as it were, with light, a radiance of the mind, cast often on small, familiar things, or things overlooked before, and reflected back into the mind and heart.

"The poet's eye is crystal," she noted in one of the few poems¹ that state an

¹ "Lens," *The Hangman Ties the Holly*, 5

explicit *æsthetique*, and her “long duty” and “daily chore” is to keep and cherish her good lens. The crystal eye, the craftsman’s lens, the light that animates them, and the green world on which it falls: these are the instruments and materials, and the colours and lights that flash through her verse. She never knew the tragedy of not living in a sensual world. It is a sensuousness of the eye that most vividly brings her world to life, but the æther through which this light vibrates is a tremor of the mind and the vision of her green world is made fruitful by love.

In the first lines of the first poem in *The Hangman Ties the Holly* she announces one of the two main themes of her book:

Who has the cunning to apprehend
Even everyday easy things
Like air and wind and a fool
Or the structure and colour of a simple soul?

New laid lovers sometimes see
In a passion of light . . .

Light is everywhere here a symbol of truth, reality, and, above all, life. *Green* signifies Nature, sensation, happiness, grace, and again life. If these aspects of her sensibility make one think of Vaughan or Traherne in the one case and of Andrew Marvell in the other, the newness, freshness, and uniqueness of her vision are not diminished but enhanced.

A traditional background is a help, not a hindrance, when it is entered into with all one’s wits about one and purified by the senses. Earth, air, fire, and water have an immediate sensational significance in the poetry of Anne Wilkinson — as well as a medieval and metaphysical one. In a poem that develops out of an aphorism by Empedocles — *I was born a boy, and a maiden, a plant and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea*² — she enters, through the twin gates of sensation and wit, into the phenomenal world and becomes a part of its life:

Yet always I huff out the flame with breath
as live
And green as Irish grass, recalling the gills
Of my youth when I was a miner
Deep in the hills of the sea.

The union of the four elements and her own identification with them is every-

² *The Hangman*, 2

where assumed, but occasionally it is explicitly, concretely, and dynamically *stated*, as in the *fiat* of the last stanza of "Poem in Three Parts":³

The stone in my hand
IS my hand
And stamped with tracings of
A once greenblooded frond,
Is here, is gone, will come,
Was fire, and green, and water,
Will be wind.

This is as close perhaps as this poet has come to a religious statement — or at least to a religious statement untouched by irony — but hers is the classic religion of Empedocles, Heracleitus, and Lucretius. What it celebrates is a metamorphosis. Over and over again she descends into the earth like Flora or Eurydice or merges white flesh, red blood, into the leafy green of a tree like Daphne:

Let the world go limp, put it to rest,
Give it a soft wet day and while it sleeps
Touch a drenched leaf; . . .

Before you turn
Uncurl prehensile fingers from the tree,
Cut your name on bark, search
The letters for your lost identity.⁴

A complete poem, though not a very long one, must be quoted as perhaps the easiest and most striking illustration of the theme of metamorphosis. It is entitled "The Red and the Green",⁵ and it will serve as a kind of epitome of qualities defining Anne Wilkinson's special and indeed unique poetic sensibility:

Here, where summer slips
Its sovereigns through my fingers
I put on my body and go forth
To seek my blood.

³ *The Hangman*, 52

⁴ *The Hangman*, 32

⁵ *The Hangman*, 23

I walk the hollow subway
Of the ear; its tunnel
Clean of blare
Echoes the lost red syllable.

Free from cramp and chap of winter
Skin is minstrel, sings
Tall tales and shady
Of the kings of Nemi Wood.

I walk an ancient path
Wearing my warmth and singing
The notes of a Druid song
In the ear of Jack-in-the-Green.

But the quest turns round, the goal,
My human red centre
Goes whey in the wind,
Mislaid in the curd and why of memory.

Confused, I gather rosemary
And stitch the leaves
To green hearts on my sleeve;
My new green arteries

Fly streamers from the maypole of my arms,
From head to toe
My blood sings green
From every heart a green amnesia rings.

My blood sings green: this is one aspect of her poetry — its intimate sensuous identification with life as a growth out of the earth; and it implies a Pan-ic or Lawrencian forgetfulness of the non-living dry and essentially irrelevant intellection of much of our routine living. But knowledge, intellect, and the motions of thought are by no means absent from these lines. They are seen of course in the buried literary allusions and the puns. The former are perhaps not essential, but they are not merely ornamental or snobbish either — they italicise and connect rather than make an initial or final assertion — and it's good to find confirmation of one's feelings in Sir James Frazer, Mother Goose, Shakespeare, and the

author of "Greensleeves." The puns, as elsewhere in this poetry,⁶ not only give an impression of liveliness, sharpness, and wit, but convey with greater precision and intensity, and immensely greater compactness, a relationship that might take clauses and sentences instead of a single word to get across. *The curd and why of memory*, for instance, presents the mental gropings after something forgotten with an almost physiological suggestion of the tremblings of the membrane of nerves and brain.

This poetry of green thoughts in a green shade is connected also with the red of the earth and of blood. The identification of the poet with nature is sensuous and emotional. It is achieved in love, and it is achieved in death. These two themes — and a union of them both in a sort of love-hate relationship with death — are found in some of the earliest of the poems as well as in some truly terror-inspiring poems which give a sombre intensity to *The Hangman Ties the Holly*. They are found too, as might have been expected, in the last, uncollected, poems.

LOVE, IN THE POETRY of Anne Wilkinson, is sometimes, as in "Strangers,"⁷ a game of wit, but it is always also a sensuous involvement, not a twining of bodies and minds only but a mingling with the green sap of Nature in a wholly holy communion. This is the significance of the delightful and lovely poem beginning "In June and gentle oven . . ."⁸

In June and gentle oven
Summer kingdoms simmer
As they come
And flower and leaf and love
Release
Their sweetest juice . . .

The music is impeccable. Presently there is one faintly sinister image, which soon we realize is intended to hint at the necessary serpent in every Eden,—

An adder of a stream
Parts the daisies.

⁶ *The Hangman*: "new laid lover," 1; "mother tongue" 2; "the warm gulf seam of love" 11; "happily lived ever waterward" 11; — to cite only a few.

⁷ *The Hangman*, 8

⁸ *The Hangman*, 17

But lovers are protected by Nature, instinct, and joy, and are “saved”:

And where, in curve of meadow,
Lovers, touching, lie,
A church of grass stands up
And walls them, holy, in.

The closing stanza of this poem is one of the most beautiful expressions in the whole field of modern poetry of the divinity of love achieved in the sensuous community of the green world:

Then two in one the lovers lie
And peel the skin of summer
With their teeth
And suck its marrow from a kiss
So charged with grace
The tongue, all knowing
Holds the sap of June
Aloof from seasons, flowing.

Something of this fertile richness is found in a later love poem — the sequence of five lyrics entitled “Variations on a Theme” in *The Tamarack Review*, No. 5. Here, however, the pure and innocent religion of love and nature has been clouded by an intense awareness, amounting almost to a foreknowledge, of death, and there is an air of faint desperation in the spells and magic rituals that (I cannot feel successfully) are tried as exorcisms.

The poem is a series of variations on a sentence of Thoreau: “A man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut to be lost in this world.” The key words are *turned* and *lost*. Each of the five lyrics explores one of the ways of being lost. Thoreau thought of losing the world in the Christian sense of a spiritual achievement, but there are many ways of being lost — some are a kind of ecstasy and all are bewildering. In the first of the variations it is childhood’s “first flinging of the blood about in circles”, a recollection of games in the green meadow when the child spins round and round in dizzying circles until the world and its own name are lost. The second and fourth lyrics are visions of horror — the second of death, the fourth of madness.

From arteries in graves, columns
Rose to soil the sky; and down
Their fluted sides the overflow
Slid to earth, unrolled and spread
On stalk and stone its plushy red.

The elegance of the writing enhances the horror of this second section, but the intensity increases still more in the nightmare-like fourth:

where above me one black crow
Had cawed my spring, two dirty doves
Sang daintily. I stoned the birds
But no stone hit, for of white gloves
My hands were made; I stole a stick
To break the sky; it did not crack;
I could not curse — though I was lost,
Had trespassed on some stranger's dream . . .

The third section, like the first, is a happy one. It deals with the magical transformation of being 'lost' in love. Significantly, it is the only poem in the sequence in which the protagonist is *we* not *I*. It is a very beautiful poem, and short enough to quote in full:

We shut our eyes and turned once round
And were up borne by our down fall.
Such life was in us on the ground
That while we moved, earth ceased to roll,
And oceans lagged, and all the flames
Except our fire, and we were lost
In province that no settler names.

The fifth poem rises almost directly out of this one and develops the theme of death more simply and traditionally than it had been treated in the second and fourth:

Death turned me first, will twirl me last
And throw me down beneath the grass
And strip me of this stuff, this dress
I am, although its form be lost.

IF THE GREEN, light-riddled poetry in which Anne Wilkinson celebrated life and the love of life makes one think of Marvell and Vaughan, she is also, like Webster (and not in her last poems only) much possessed by death. I mentioned earlier the love-hate relationship with death that seems almost in-

herent in her sensibility and that animates in a truly terror-inspiring way a few of her most powerful poems, "The Pressure of Night,"⁹ "Strangers,"¹⁰ "Topsoil to the Wind,"¹¹ as well as the recent deceptively light and witty "Notes on Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*"¹² and the brilliant "*A Cautionary Tale*."¹³ These place Anne Wilkinson among the small group of women poets who have written of love and death with a peculiarly feminine intuition, an accuracy, and an elegance that does not hide but enhance the intensity of the emotion — Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Elinor Wylie, and Leonie Adams. Her work as a whole puts her, certainly, in the forefront of contemporary Canadian poets. Like Reaney and Macpherson and Avison she has helped us to be a little more aware and hence a little more civilized. Her poems are a legacy whose value can never be diminished.

⁹ *The Hangman*, 4

¹⁰ *The Hangman*, 8

¹¹ *The Hangman*, 31

¹² *The Tamarack Review*, No. 18, 36-40

¹³ *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, no. 211

