

VISION OF CLARITY

THE POETRY OF WILFRED WATSON

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WILFRED WATSON is a person of highly developed sensibilities. One cannot listen to him talk for any length of time without being struck by the keenness and intensity of his response to the world around him. Whether he speaks of French lettuce, spring sunrises in Edmonton, the funeral of Utrillo, Mozart's *Requiem*, or the shape of an automobile, he constantly reveals himself as one vividly aware of his sense experiences. Of all these experiences — if one can judge from his poetry — those which affect him most deeply and lastingly are those which he knows visually: with notable frequency the imagery of his poems is drawn from effects of colour, form, light, and darkness. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that Watson has at various times tried his hand as a painter, nor is it surprising to find among his poems a number of pieces reflecting his interest in painters and their work. In the course of these he makes some profoundly perceptive comments not only on the particular effects of individual paintings, but also on the nature of art in general, and on the strength of these comments one can move towards some understanding of Watson's essential nature as a poet.

The central claim which Watson makes for great painting is that it illuminates. In the lines on Emily Carr, in *Friday's Child*, he writes of the painter:

. . . down the valley you looked and saw
All wilderness become transparent vapour,
A ghostly underneath a fleshly stroke,
And every bush an apocalypse of leaf

And in an unpublished poem on a still life by Stanley Cosgrove he declares that in the formal balance of the finished painting the beholder finds

The palpable
Claritas
 Till the difficult mind sees
 Clear^t

The artist is one who initially sees deeply and clearly into the nature of things, and who then has the capacity to reveal his insight to others.

Nowhere does Watson demonstrate more fully his faith in the illuminating power of great art than in his meditation on Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*.² Through this painting of Hendrickje Stoffels as Bathsheba, Watson's own response to the biblical subject has been both enriched and clarified, and therefore heightened. By a complex emotional, intellectual, and imaginative process the poet has moved to a grasp of all that is caught in Rembrandt's curiously suggestive treatment of Bathsheba as she waits, proud yet saddened, for the royal David: Hendrickje's fleshly beauty exerts its strong sexual attraction, and in so doing brings a new sympathetic understanding of David's lust for similar beauty in Bathsheba; the attractiveness of the painted figure gives rise to the idea that Hendrickje, impressed by her own beauty as revealed by the painter, must have felt a pride in her loveliness akin to the pride of Bathsheba in hers; this idea in turn gives way to the thought that perhaps Hendrickje also knew something of the sorrow of Bathsheba when as a result of her own beauty Bathsheba learned the frailty of kings; and this thought leads to the tragic foreshadowing implicit in Bathsheba's sorrowful expression and in the surrounding darkness which ominously closes in upon the magnificent central figure:

This canvas darkens
 Upon the terrible poetry of our clay;
 But I forget Rembrandt and his Hendrickje,
 And only see King David's Bathsheba,

 Who knew her husband done unto the death;
 Who bore that dead son from King David's loins;
 And then bore to the king at length forgiven
 The wise and sorrowful man, Solomon.

Watson's conception of the function and value of painting is essentially religious—the painter, like the prophet, reveals things which have hitherto been hidden to men of limited vision — and when one turns to his actual practice as an artist in another medium, verse, one is not surprised to find that he implicitly conceives of poetry as having much the same function and value. The poet, too, perceives and reveals. The only significant difference between the painter and the poet is one of means.

THE WORLD which Watson the poet tries to reveal is for him both simple and complex. There is an almost primitive simplicity in his concern with the natural processes of copulation, birth, and death; in his recurring interest in the contrast between the cruel violence of human behaviour and the perfect peace of total love; and in his sad recognition that man often seems determined to pervert, and even deny, the greatest values of life — beauty, light, mercy, pity, and love. But in his treatments of these matters Watson is sharply conscious of the complexity of the world in which they play a part: ours is a world both beautiful and terrible, full and empty, brave and fearful; a world in which birth implies death, love engenders hate, blessing leads to curse; a world where time itself is but a misleading, though useful, illusion. And so it is that when, in the "Love Song for Friday's Child", Watson turns to the moment of the first human act of love, he offers a passage like this, simple in its essential matter, but highly complex in its handling — its clarification — of that matter:

Then nor
 Any day nor
 Any moment neither
 But now — ever and ever
 It was, and the Garden of Eden was
 The day before. The first
 Love of the world, the curst
 First marriage poured
 Into my veins its heaven.
 And centuries of birds sang laughter
 Into my heart of rafters
 Till the tomb egg broken
 A bell rang and swung its thought

White in the pulse and stanch
Of my black blood's branch

Life is itself simple, but the living of life is an infinitely complex experience.

In that experience — if it is to be full and satisfying — Watson insists that man must recognize the fundamental importance of two forces, both centered in the individual being. One is the will; the other, love. With great frequency Watson stresses his belief in the need for a positive exercise of the will if human endeavour is to prove fruitful. Ours is a world grown tired and sick, and in our world-sickness we have lost the capacity for thoughtfully determined action:

Our shrouds are sea-rotten; and our keels
Are rust and weeds; broken is our limb;
Our winded oar is master of our wills.³

When we act we do so on impulse, often with tragic results. Like the Ancient Mariner we destroy what we cannot understand, and we do so not with any particular end in view, but because we are baffled and hence disturbed:

And what was the use, now you've shot the bird dead?
There was no use at all
To shoot the bird dead.
Now get me a drink, for I shot the bird dead.⁴

As Marlowe's Faustus knew not what to do with the powers he gained, and frittered them away in trivialities, so the twentieth-century Faustus wastes the capacities of his civilization and knows no greater happiness, no greater sense of fulfilment, than did his predecessor:

Drift we and sift we
Into the flourcloth sourcloth cities, silent
Or mumbling dumb.⁵

So highly does Watson value the conscious will as essential to the human spirit, that when he offers up a hymn of praise to *God's mankind* he takes as the particular object of his praise an old woman who has nothing left but her will. Stripped though she is of almost all bodily blessings, she still burns with the fire of her own determination, the fire of her *will-full* nature, and although it is true that this may reveal itself in

“the flash and strife” of hatred, and that it may lead her into the parched deserts of sinfulness, so long as it blazes within her she is one of *God’s mankind* and deserving of praise:

I praise God’s mankind in an old woman:
 I hear him rattle the body of an old wife
 Dry and brown, and bitter as bracken,
 Her stalk womb-cancelled, sere with seedgone;
 With shrivel fingers clutching upon her life,
 Wrestling for the empty pod and the dry leaf.
 But still in her mildewed eyes moist’s last token —
 But oh, ever in her eyes the flash and strife,
 Husk edge, cruel and sharp as any knife
 Which not God’s death itself can unsharpen.⁶

The will alone, however, is not sufficient in itself. If man is to achieve his highest fulfilment he must subject his will to the power of love. The first poem in *Friday’s Child*, the “Invocation”, makes clear the importance Watson attaches to this power:

O love, teach us to love you, that we may
 Through burning Carthage take our way.

And in the course of the poems which follow the “Invocation” the values and the demands of love are constantly held before us. Watson is obviously deeply aware of himself as a member of a social whole: the *I* is always seen as part of a larger *We* to whom he extends his words of consolation, and for whom he offers up his prayers.

The title of *Friday’s Child* gives, of course, a clear indication of the emphasis Watson places on love: “Friday’s Child”, in the words of the nursery rhyme, “is loving and giving”, and this collection of poems can be read as a set of variations on the theme of love. Some of these variations consist of re-workings of traditional romantic material — Aeneas’ desertion of Dido, Orpheus’ fatal glance at Eurydice — but Watson’s concern is not primarily with the raptures and sorrows of romantic love. This love is to him chiefly important in so far as it becomes part of a universal love-force. Love is both the source of life and the law of living. The Creation itself was an act of divine love in which love decreed all:

. . . love which sang, the first light commanded,
 The waters divided, the earth parcelled out

For flowers, beasts and creeping things,
 The air given for birds,
 The sun made round and warm,
 The moon mild as milk⁷

And although man has long since lost the primal joy of Eden, his great hope for its restoration lies in yet another act of divine love:

. . . the singing
 Rose sang in the lap of Mary. Darkness
 Sang to the light and the kiss of love was peace.⁸

Only when man accepts his place in the divine scheme of love, however, and recognizes that this scheme demands that he love all other beings, can he know the full blessings of life:

Do not begin loving
 To dumb now
 Your prayer but pray now even
 For the old woman of the waters
 The gull galls, and the heron,
 For the old woman crossing
 And breeding all creatures
 In the weathers
 Of her waspnest brow

So may the Lord bless
 Your loving
 And have all mercy upon your soul
 And wrap it in the white lamb's wool
 And bind
 It white to the world's end.⁹

In the "Love Song for Friday's Child" Watson offers his fullest consideration of the nature of love and its place in the divine plan. The poem takes the form of a series of seven meditations, and in these Watson imaginatively suggests some of the various forms of love, their attributes and their values. Here one finds the love of man and woman in its bridal rapture, the love of mother for child, and the innate love of man for what is good. And all these — like all varieties of love — are one in essence. All find their source in the love of God, that love first made manifest in the Creation, and later reaffirmed in the Incarnation:

O Mother of Sorrows, standing
By your Son hanging,
The love that began again
Ask for us, and again and again
World without end

(V, 13-17)

Watson's concern with love as the great power in life has persisted in his work since *Friday's Child*. One finds clear evidence of it in such a passage as this from an unpublished poem, "The Harrow of Love":

Forgive us the flesh of fires, the city
Fleshed with fire, our sin undone
That our flesh must breed burn and bleed
To break this heart to pity.
Forgive the nail re-driven.
Forgive the harrow of women.
Forgive this hand because this hand cannot bind
In peace the peace this hand in war must find
Forgive this blood's spill
Of blood till all
Our blood is pity, this harrow
Of love, till all our love is sorrow

But perhaps the most striking evidence of it is to be found in a quite remarkable short story, also unpublished, "The Lice". In this the central character, a bishop, performs a sublime act of love, taking upon himself the sins of his flock. The all-embracing nature of this love, its fusion of the human and the divine, is revealed at the moment of the bishop's deepest agony when, rising above the suffering of the flesh, he calls out, "My God I love thee".

As a result of his belief in the all-importance of love Watson is a poet very conscious of "the pity of things". Running through his work is a warm humanity which keeps him constantly aware of the suffering, the tragedy, of human existence. The death of an aged prostitute moves him to comment:

The worth of better people
Teaches them how to die
But we must bring a candle
And on our knees must pray
For her on Judgment Day¹⁰

He sees a woman in a graveyard, and despite his conviction that even in death love offers the great hope of the world he still is deeply moved by man's pathetic inability to accept the brute fact of death:

O mother grieving
 The grief that is common and human
 O woman wonderful
 In your small miracle
 Of faith and loving —
 Quiet you, that another miracle
 Must come and the wind blow
 Into the troubles of the sky
 The dust you place
 On the upraised hand
 Of this high cliff¹¹

And even in his satiric moments — and they are frequent — his attitude is never entirely devoid of pity. In the "Ballad of Faustus" he comments sharply on the emptiness of a number of persons' lives, but sharp though his comments are he cannot conceal his pity for the human beings doomed to live those lives. A lone spinster whose virtue is entirely negative sits smugly thinking of her goodness while a dripping tap makes its suggestive comment, both cruel and pitying:

Day after day adds up, she thought
 To a clear and perfect chrysolite
 And she folded her hands in her lap —
 Perhaps, said the tap, drip drip
 (V. 1-4)

The very audibility of the small sound in the room is more than enough to suggest the bleak emptiness of her life.

FROM WATSON'S WORK emerges, then, a vision of life governed by responsibility and love. The tragedy of human existence has resulted from man's failure to accept these as the basis of living. Only when he restrains his impulse to kill the white bird, and acts as love directs him can man hope for happiness.

Quite evidently this is an almost sublimely simple intellectual basis for living. But, as I have already suggested, despite the simplicity of Watson's

themes his poetry reflects a very realistic appreciation of the complex nature of the moment of human existence. In the poetry, therefore, Watson establishes a certain tension between the simple idea on the one hand, and the packed image on the other, the image which conveys with sometimes startling vividness the mingled experience in which the idea is revealed.

In his imagery Watson gives clear evidence of his strongly sensuous nature. Some of the most striking passages in his work are those in which he conveys a particularly vivid sense experience. In the brief lyric "For Anne, Who Brought Tulips" he recreates the effect which the sight of full-blown tulips has had upon him:

Let these trumpets tongued with dust blow their magnificent
 Brief music; not for the exigent
 Last moment, when the creature at last comes home
 To reason, order, proportion, doom;
 But in a period of disordered haste
 Let them blow their blast
 To mark the ceremony of season
 When all the weather is unreason.

Similarly, in "Ghosts", he evokes the mood into which he passed when struck by the beauty of hyacinths:

Purple and red hyacinths
 Before their fading
 Are bells tolling
 The sleeper to the apparition
 Of beauty, the angel in the room
 Which like a ghost
 Comes and departs
 Leaving a wonder and a horror
 In our unspeakable hearts

But Watson's imagery here, as elsewhere, seeks to do more than simply call up corresponding sensory responses in his reader. To speak of tulips as "trumpets tongued with dust" is to suggest directly and vividly the physical nature of the flowers, but to move on to suggest that those trumpets may even sound is to introduce something beyond the simple sense impression. And then to declare further that they will not, however, sound at the Last Judgment, announcing the completion of the divine

plan, is to introduce something yet once again removed. But all these elements fuse into an imaginative entity when in the last four lines the poet establishes his central contrast between the graceful stateliness of the tulip — itself the very symbol of “reason, order, proportion” — and the tumult of the unsettled spring weather in which it blooms. And, in much the same way, in “Ghosts” the hyacinths are seen first as “bells” — a simple visual image — but then these bells are described as calling the sleeping soul into the presence of beauty which comes and goes like a ghost, leaving “a wonder and a horror” behind.

Watson almost never presents a simple sense impression for its own sake. He recognizes that in the actual moment of sensory excitement a multitude of feelings and thoughts, like a complicated counterpoint, play around and condition the central response, and in his poetry he tries to suggest this mingled richness. Even in such a simple poem as “The Juniper Tree” one can recognize the poet’s concern with this mingling. Here two lovers arrange to meet beneath the juniper tree, but when the time of meeting arrives the man finds his beloved white as death, and when he seeks to claim a kiss,

O never you will, said she
O never you will, said she

The interest of the poem lies in the development of a mood of heavy foreboding into which the maiden’s almost flippant reply cuts like a sharp knife. To suggest this mood Watson makes considerable use of colours, establishing in the course of the narrative a most suggestive tonal pattern. When the lover first comes to the juniper tree the juniper cone burns *blue*: all is soft and tender. But as he waits, “the *black* minutes go by”, and an ominous foreshadowing is suggested. He hears a “*red* fox cough”, and the first hint of blood appears, a hint which is to be left fearfully ambiguous at the end of the poem. Always “the *black* minutes go by”, and when rain comes the ominousness deepens for the rain falls in a “*black* wet sleet”. And then, when the maiden appears and stands before her love in the blackness,

As white as death was she
As white as death was she

And now the mood is established for the climactic question and answer :

Then why are you so long my love, my love
 As I waited at the juniper tree?
 But now I will kiss your mouth, he said
 O never you will, said she
 O never you will, said she

Much more, of course than the little narrative and the colour sequence enters into the total experience of "The Juniper Tree" — a cow laments the loss of its calf; an owl flies low through the juniper branches; and the wind blows rattling seeds in the dead weeds — but all that plays a part has this in common with the narrative and the colour sequence: it bears in some way on the central experience, and at the same time it realistically enriches the experience. And the more of Watson's poetry one reads, the more one appreciates his ability to reveal comprehensible form in a moment of life without stripping that moment of its richness.

Probably the most striking examples of this ability are to be found in some of Watson's briefest images. In the "Love Song for Friday's Child", considering the first act of love between man and woman, he speaks of "the tomb egg broken", and in so doing rouses a great complex of feelings, images, and ideas, all relevant and illuminating. (In the egg life normally develops, but in this egg — although life will come — death is also to develop; birth comes now for men who must die; from the moment of conception, in life we are in death; this act will lead ultimately to two tombs — that of mortal man, but also that of Christ — and from the entrance to the second tomb the stone shall be pushed aside.) In such an image as this, clear and strong in its immediate effect, yet inexhaustibly suggestive in its implications, one finds the medium in which Watson, at his best, speaks. Here in his own poetry is the equivalent of what he so highly values in painting:

The palpable
Claritas
 Till the difficult mind sees
 Clear

In vividly sensuous terms he offers his own clear vision of life, and lets that vision affect us by becoming part of our own experience.

When Northrop Frye reviewed *Friday's Child* he concluded his review with these words:

How posterity will sort out and rank the poets of today I do not know, nor much care; but in such poems as "In the Cemetery of the Sun," the "Canticle of Darkness" and perhaps the title poem, one may catch a glimpse of the reasons why, in the course of time, what the poet has to say about his culture becomes so important and what everyone else has to say becomes so much less so.¹²

What Wilfred Watson offers in his particular vision of life is almost child-like in its essential simplicity, but the vision of the child is not to be undervalued: it often has a directness and a courage beyond the command of the knowing adult. And at its most searching it has the *claritas* which Watson so highly values.

NOTES

¹ "The Simple Cup: Lines on a Still Life by Stanley Cosgrove". For permission to use this and other unpublished material, and for generous assistance given in long conversations, I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Watson.

² "Of Hendrickje as Bathsheba".

³ "Invocation", 4-6.

⁴ "The White Bird", 18-21.

⁵ "Ballad of Faustus", VII, 5-7. (In *Delta*, July 1958, 1-5.)

⁶ "Lines: I Praise God's Mankind in an Old Woman", 1-10.

⁷ "Canticle of Darkness". 13-18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59-61.

⁹ "A Valediction for the End of the Year", 48-62.

¹⁰ "Queen of Tarts", 30-34.

¹¹ "Graveyard on a Cliff of White Sand", 14-24.

¹² "Letters in Canada, 1955", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXV, 1956, 294.