

REPUTATIONS RECOUPED

Anne Wilkinson

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A few years ago, over dinner at his flat in Toronto, I asked the novelist and poet Richard Teleky – in one of those conversations that North Americans do so well, flitting from topic to topic, from the differences between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox funeral rights to visiting Marguerite Yourcenar's home on Mount Desert Island – about the poet Anne Wilkinson (1910-61). Signal Editions of Montreal had just reissued her oeuvre, I remember. 'Oh, she's wonderful,' he told me. 'Someone tries to resurrect her every twenty years or so, but the poems don't take.'

The poems don't take. I've thought hard about this. What it means when being a wonderful poet isn't enough, when good writing doesn't suit an age or a society, perhaps; or a social programme for that matter. Wilkinson was, in her lifetime, appreciated, published, anthologised, but the appreciation, publications and anthologies since her early death from complications due to cancer have slowed and slowed.

In her fifty years, she completed just two books of poems and left a trail of magazine publications. She has been resurrected in book form three times: first by her greatest supporter, the Canadian anthologist and poet A.J.M. Smith, in 1968; second, in 1990, her poems were collected and edited by poet Joan Coldwell; and most recently in *Heresies: the Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson (1924-1961)*, edited by Canadian Modernism scholar Dean Irvine.

She was not a groundbreaking poet. There are no new, exciting forms here, no real breaks from the past or tradition: Wilkinson is instead tied directly into her age. Stylistically, she was a poet of the then and there. Read her poems and the shade of Dylan Thomas, the most prominent poet of her era, rises and casts itself about. As a young woman, educated and raised in a wealthy, Southern Ontario family (her great-uncle on her mother's side was the physician Sir William Osler, the 'father of modern medicine'), loyal to the flag and the crown (as any good colonialist with a knighted great-uncle would be), Wilkinson would have read Thomas. He toured widely and was *the* poet of the Empire at the time. Another Canadian poet, Daryl Hine, told me how he himself was introduced to Thomas in British Columbia in 1951, when just fifteen. Thomas was not only a poet, he was a presence.

What gets Wilkinson out into the sunshine, however, is the manner in which she shakes Thomas's ghost. Because even as she welcomes the apocalypse, she is frustrated by it, turning and twisting the prophetic with a shake of her head. Hers is what Northrop Frye called a "parody-apocalypse". What I mean by this is exemplified in 'Little Men Slip into Death', a short poem from *The Hangman Ties the Holly* (1955), Wilkinson's second collection. It has to it something of Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle', but advances in a very different way:

Little men slip into death
As the diver slides into water
With only a ripple
To tell where he's hidden.

Big muscles struggle harder in the grave.
 The earth is slow to settle on their bones,
 Erupting into mounds or sprouting flowers
 Or giving birth to stones.

And how to stand a tombstone
 With the ground not quiet yet,
 And what to say, what not to say
 When moss is rooted and the stone is set?

The first stanza has the spirit of Randy Newman's song, 'Short People': there's a meanness in the speaker, who suggests that weaker men just die and leave little trace. The second continues the bias, with its preference for the burly type not going gently into the good earth, it seems. The parody, odd as it is, kicks in the final section, as the poet worries how to stand a tombstone, which even as the ground erupts, sprouts and gives birth, does eventually settle anyways, leaving the stone set. Her whingeing and griping has made little difference: little or big-muscled both leave the poet to consider death and the problem of continuing to live. This is the parody: the mocking of the heroic in Thomas's poem, and most importantly the woman's perspective on such a mode. Though inspired by the poetry of men, Wilkinson was a poet very much concerned with being a woman; she had lived through two world wars and the loss of her father when she was nine. It is clear in all of her poems that a female voice is speaking, and that a feminine perspective on the world itself is called for. She seems almost self-conscious about it, in fact; but is too subtle a poet to be caught out in such a way.

Sometimes, we postcolonial types go looking for writers whose work meets the fashion of the empire. This is as much true of poetry as it is of fashion, music and art; and it's as much true today as it was sixty or seventy years ago (only now we can choose between multiple empires). In a way, in the fifties, Wilkinson was that poet. But in reconsidering her work now, it is clear that she was not some sort of female Canadian disciple of Thomas. We all have our starting points, and living beyond those points is a luxury: just before he died, Thomas confessed to a young Donald Hall that he believed he had not outdone his starting point, Yeats. Did Wilkinson? Her two collections and run of periodical publications are various and vital, full of mythical, metaphorical, and metaphysical work ranging from ballads to riddle-poems to nursery rhymes. Many of her formal considerations are indebted to her reading of Thomas. But that "parody-apocalypse" – and let's be clear: just because she parodies does not mean she aims for humour – separates her work and makes it distinctive.

Her long poem, 'Nature Be Damned', published in a Canadian journal in 1957, but not collected in the poet's lifetime, might be speaking again to Thomas directly, but if so it is a poem of rejection, which Dean Irvine calls 'a curse upon her Green Order':

And so I damn the font where I was blessed,
 Am unbeliever; was deluded lover; never
 Bird or leaf or branch and bark of tree.
 Each, separate as curds from whey,
 Has signature to prove identity.

'Nature Be Damned' was meant to open her third collection, which was partially assembled in manuscript form when Wilkinson died. It's clear that even as she was acknowledging a debt in this

poem, she was also shaking it off. "The force that through the green fuse" drove Thomas is a font for Wilkinson to damn. The title of what might have been her third collection, *Heresies and Other Poems* (there is no poem titled 'Heresies' in the manuscript), tells us as much. But the poem is more complex, because it isn't just a parody of Thomas but of the apocalyptic movement in total. In five sections, the poet moves through the world denying and even destroying nature, but in section five she comes full circle, "Once a year in the smoking bush / A little west of where I sit / I burn my winter caul to green ash". In this final act, which is a ritual itself, "an annual festival", Wilkinson is goddess, reborn and born, mother and child: and so the world itself is reborn. Yet, the final closing couplet draws all this into question – "Then roused from this reality I saw / Nothing, anywhere, but snow" – and she's lost control. Perhaps at this point the poet is not a Thomas disciple at all, but a fellow-traveler, and one who sees and resolves the world very differently. What was parody has become its own poetic. Wilkinson's poems took her beyond the apocalypse, denied it, and ended up in the snow. There's that frustration, that shaking of her head I mentioned. She can't quite believe it herself, and this is what makes her poems unique.

Yet *the poems don't take*. I think I understand what Richard was saying to me. Wilkinson has not been fashionable since she died, true. But she wrote at a time in Canada when our national poetry turned more to Great Britain than the US: a time that the generation before my own turned away from in their search for a more quintessentially Canadian verse. I make this connection now, because Wilkinson did everything else. She had chops and finesse, style, substance and a verse that was steadily and uniquely her own. She fit into her age and responded to it with verve. But sometime after she had departed, her tradition turned just enough in her native country that what she was doing was deemed unattractive. That's a shame, as what falls between the cracks in these kinds of poetical shifts is often worth as much if not more than what comes to the surface.

Evan Jones's second collection, *Paralogues*, is forthcoming with Carcanet.

