

J. W. WILKINSON AND HIS POETRY, TWO HEMISPHERES: ONE BRAIN

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"I have taken on, and been adopted by this country. Nothing would make me leave, nor do I feel the need to—at least, that is what I hope."

It has been nearly twenty years since the poet John W. Wilkinson left his native land, Australia, to live and work in Barcelona. He then found a Costa Brava which is now virtually non-existent, and he has taken root here through marriage to a Catalan. He is probably the only case of a poet and performer who hails from such a distance, having published his first book of poems *The Better Argument* in this city in English and Catalan simultaneously.¹

For Wilkinson, one of the virtues of poetry—as with prose—is its conciseness. Over the twenty years during which he has lived amongst the Catalans, apart from getting to know Catalan culture (he confesses his admiration for the recently deceased poet Marià Manent), he has come to dedicate his time to writing, exploring, living and to reading widely: "to distil from this enormous amount of material the poems which are now being published in English and Catalan". And he stipulates: "The laborious part of writing both poetry and prose consists of throwing out and reworking, cutting out excess; precisely the opposite of what I see happening these days in many successful novels which take two hundred pages to expound what could be said in fifty".

"Poetry"—says Wilkinson—"is not simply constructed with intentions or ideas, but with words, as Mallarmé said to a baffled Degas. In the Beginning was the Word, as it appears in the Scriptures or as we appreciate it in Homer, and in the End shall be the word. We are language. We invent new products, ingenious technology, but in the end the word will be decisive. We think in words and we transfer images to words. To read poetry is a private act, but through it we may also discover the world. In the thirties, poetry possessed a social dimension and it is true that poetry also reflects a world situation or that of a country. Since the Second World War, Europe has bettered its economic situation and poetry can now discover topics which are on the edge of thought, ideas which we have not yet touched upon. Poetry discovers worlds and, at times, lost worlds. But it always originates from the world we live in."

Wilkinson says that when Christopher Columbus was heading West towards the East, he discovered the vast continent of America in his path: "It has taken so-called

1.- John W. Wilkinson, *The Better Argument*, (Barcelona: Columna, 1991). The English originals of John W. Wilkinson's poetry which follow are published by kind permission of the author and Editorial Columna.

Westerners five hundred years to populate the American continent. However, nowadays Japan rivals —and in some cases outstrips — America, and China is a powerful country still in the making. Poetry as vision is for the West what religion is for the East. We find meanings. For those of us in the West without beliefs, poetry enlightens us, even though we have to agree with T.S. Eliot when he said that deep down we cannot be sure what poetry is, and there lies its secret”.

A poet is a creator, but he creates worlds. Wilkinson uses his poem *Tendrils* as a good example to suggest that it is wrong to always believe that the first person in the poem is the poet. Since the Moralists poets of the Thirties and from the beginning of T.S. Eliot’s poetry to the present day, the distinction (of which the dead poet Jaime Gil de Biedma with his “posthumous Poems” is a good example here in Barcelona) is clear that: in order to die as a poet and preserve oneself as a living person, it is necessary to keep talking to the poetic self and write poems posthumously.

To this writer of Australian and Irish ancestry, Australia appears to be Victorian England somewhere “at the end of the World”, even though he confesses to liking people who live there and suspects that Australian society has changed enormously since he left. People from the Mediterranean and other latitudes have helped him to understand the strict education received in his childhood. So he installed himself in a villa on the Costa Brava, where he manages to enjoy what is left of the natural wildlife of the Catalan coastline. In the proximity rises “Mas Juny”, which the Catalan painter Josep Maria Sert acquired in 1932.

In these days of cultures establishing a dialogue, we can remember Dante Alighieri, who straddled the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and knew of the existence of the Southern Cross —the same which can be seen on the Australian flag— in the Southern hemisphere. Perhaps in the future the two hemispheres will become united, forming a complete brain, as it were; an idea which Wilkinson explores in his poem *Hemispheres*. “Perhaps it is already beginning to happen”, says Wilkinson.

THE LAST ACT

A tired tongue claps in the bell
Of his mouth: a flourish of words
To parry this living drollery.
The lights swathe him in diaphanous robes.
His mind is a workshop of broken masks
He labours desperately to reconstruct

From the forgotten summits of love
He memorised, spirits to enforce,
And now verses of inspiration
Smudged into oblivion by a drop of water.
His illuminated head muses:
He dreams that he dreamed he dreamed.

A swallow flutters across the glass

Dragging up Africa on frantic wings—
He will soon be driving through dusty suburbs
To a deserted beach, still skeletal
After the rape of winter; lying on sick sand,
Watching the pantomime of his lost thoughts

Perform tragedies and comedies, with him,
An old ham, in the leading role.
It will be a dull, improper soliloquy;
He'll forget his lines when the curtain goes up.
A few satiated gulls will flap
Polite applause; a wave will rise

And fall, splashing eternity,
As he stands for the first curtain call,
And the next, and the next, and the next.
But the theatre is not empty yet—
The sea is rampant with drowned men
Spreading white brocade over the rocks.

After this last and final act
He will remove the paint from all his selves
And merge with that other world,
No longer an actor, but an ordinary man,
With no props, stepping out through the stage door
Into another order of allegory.

THE SPIDER AND THE MIRROR

I will show you your reflection
in a bucket of tears...

you will shout at it;
you will laugh at it;
you will grope to bleed
a seed of yourself into it;
you will scoop a handful
of lies out of it;
you will see a gaggle
of lovers trapped in it;
you will sprinkle a film
of dust over it;
you will pour on petrol

and set fire to it;
you will watch it grow
old and spit on it;
you will feel thirst
and drink from it;
you will be a spider
in the web of a mirror
eating the carrion
of your reflection-
and die in it!

BOULDERS

Boulders every
which way as
if the innards of
a broken kaleidoscope
chucked aside by
a bored god at
the water's edge:
some of them
precariously balanced,
liable to topple
at any moment-

and I pass by
(ridiculously small)
one or a thousand million
instances before
they fall.

TO JOHN KEATS

For Rosa M^a Piñol

Come down, John Keats,
Come down from the loft!
Clippety-clop clippety-clop
There are horses dancing
At the Swan and Hoop.
Clippety-clop clippety-clop

Oh your mammy is sweeter
Than the sweetest flower
And your pappy's gone riding
To meet his hour.
The film of death
Has begun to roll:
It will not stop
Till it has your soul!

A usurper stalks
In the empty shop;
But two months dead
And he's got the lot
Clippety-clop clippety-clop
But two months dead
And he's got the lot.

Come down, John Keats,
Five feet high,
Come down, look up
At the pagan sky!
The king is mad.
The gods now sleep.
This world is sad
For little John Keats.

Run over the fields
To magical Spenser,
He'll charm you with shepherds,
A red knight and a spectre.
Oh the numbers are coming,
Clippety-clop
The numbers are coming
And will never stop.
The miseries of the world
Won't let you rest.
Through flowers and weed
You must seek your death.
To Margate run,
Stare into the sea-
There are bulging maws
Waiting for *thee*.

Then to Scotland walk

On sublunary legs,
See a poet's tomb,
Taste gold from a keg.
Your brother is dying.
There's work to be done.
The sick eye of the eagle
Looks up at the sun.

Junkets, forget
The prospering stable,
Bare your heart
On the operating table.
Tom's death was a blow
And so was your Granny's—
You are a lucky fellow
To have two Fannies!

In the throat of joy
Cruel cancers creep.
You know not if you wake
Or if you sleep.
To Italy fly
With blood in your mouth.
The old gods are calling,
Calling you south.

Yes, the wings of poesy
Took you high,
Like Icarus you aimed
At the burning sky.
No one would hearken
—Or so you thought—
But in Shelley's pocket
Was a volume of worth.

Water shapes valleys
And caverns and coves,
But wrote not a name
On your tombstone.
So that Greek lyre
That Severn forgot
Tells us not who you were
But what, *clippety-clop*
Not who you were but what.
Clippety clippety... clop clop clop

‘WHY SHOULD THE SUN... ,

Why should the sun unbend its golden beams,
or the moon stay put in river’s flow?
To catch a fish the fisher spears its shadow,
to seize reality we wade through dreams.

BALLADE

(After François Villon)

To critics, moles and triple agents,
Joggers, dole snatchers and collegians,
To yuppies, dinks and architects,
Selfish arseholes, parliamentarians,
To ambidextrous apologists of the bum,
To little shits in love’s embraces,
Who squirt Heidegger when they come,
I shove a custard tart in their faces.

To young ladies with silicone tits,
Designers, Lord Mayors, hooligans,
To disco-machos and their lousy hits,
To computer programmers and doctrinarians,
To psychiatrists and their sanctimonious scum,
Journalists, teachers and obituary spaces
That make chartered accountants dumb,
I shove a custard tart in their faces,

Save, of course, philosophical wits,
Medicucho butchers and bourgeoisians
Who clawed to fame after the blitz,
With Swiss accounts in the curriculums.
To them I’d leave a seething slum
Of cocaine mirrors and missile cases,
But as this pen is my only gun,
I shove a custard tart in their faces.

Minister, shit yourself, be done
With snivelling pomp and social graces,
The war of survival has already begun.
I shove a custard tart in their faces.