DOROTHY AUCHTERLONIE (GREEN): THE GLOBAL FEELING OF HOME

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Although Dorothy Green (1915-1991) is mainly known as a scholar, literary critic and historian, she also published three volumes of poetry under her maiden name of Dorothy Auchterlonie: *Kaleidoscope* (1940), *The Dolphin* (1967), and *Something to Someone* (1983).[1]

Dorothy Auchterlonie's poetry is characterized by intellectual sharpness, erudition, an independent and critical mind. These qualities are probably just as clearly present in her artistic work as in her literary essays. She moves in her poems freely not only in space (Expressionistic abstractions have probably influenced her writing) but also in time, as well as in intellectual, philosophical, theological and other metaphysical spheres thus transcending the narrowness of an individual, particular, local observation. It is not surprising then that she first of all tried to find, via communication with other people, those features which brought her closer to their spiritual values and emotional experiences regardless of their physical habitat.

During the period of the last fifteen years of her life we had at times a lively correspondence and so I have the privilege of corroborating some of my assertions with quotations from her letters. So, for example, she wrote to me about the feeling of belonging to a place, a country, as follows: "My own experience is that 'at home' feelings cut right across national boundaries: the people one has most in common with can be scattered about the globe, while those near by are alien."[2] Dorothy Auchterlonie Green was really a citizen of the world, not only as regards her wide and deep knowledge of literature, but also with respect to her sensitivity to human problems, which was substantiated by the openness of her mind for new aspects of solving man's existential questions.

Dorothy Auchterlonie did not have a very good opinion of her first volume of poems in the later years of her life; she actually thought they should be "left in obscurity".[3] Nevertheless she was proud that the image of the coat hanger as a metaphor for the Sydney Harbour Bridge came into common use, although probably in an indirect way through the review of her collection which was published "in the Red Page of the

1.- The collections are: *Kaleidoscope*, (Sydney: Viking Press, 1940) (abbreviated as *K*); *The Dolphin*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 1967) (abbreviated as *D*); *Something to Someone*, (Canberra: Brindabella Press, 1983) (abbreviated as *STS*).

2.- Dorothy Auchterlonie Green in a letter to Mirko Jurak (31 January 1982).

3.- Dorothy Auchterlonie Green in a letter to Mirko Jurak (12 April 1982).

Bulletin". She was angry that her metaphor was "stolen" and attributed to someone else.[4] She modestly asserted though that she believed she had written "a handful of poems which are extremely rare in subject matter, that is, they are genuinely 'theological', as opposed to simply religious".[5] A distinction between these two terms as given by any standard English dictionary can be summarized in the fact that whereas poems dealing with religious themes basically express the speaker's belief in God, man's state of mind in his way of life expressing love for and trust in God, man's will and effort to act according to the will of God; poems dealing with a theological subject reveal man's interest in studying God and the relationship between God and the universe. Briefly, the first kind of poetry is more affirmative, apologetic, whereas the second usually accepts the theistic premise but is basically oriented towards "a discourse with God", it is questioning and seeks new theological interpretations and may be sceptical towards theology.

Several Australian critics were obviously puzzled by Dorothy Auchterlonie's verse, by her terse, serene, condensed, clear-cut, and controlled manner of writing, by the ironic subtleties of her statements, by her mixture of individual emotional experiences and her metaphysical comprehension of the world. Her poetry really stands apart from the prevailing contemporary trends in Australian poetry. Therefore to call her "an old-fashioned poet" is an over-simplification; or, to assert: "Miss Auchterlonie writes simple inoffensive occasional poetry, competent to a degree, and that is all, as bold as the statement is",[6] surely shows that the critic did not try to (or that he could not) delve into the complexities of Auchterlonie's mental world as presented in her poetry.

There are not many poems included either in *The Dolphin* or in *Something to Someone* which deal directly either with public events or with Auchterlonie's private world, the factographically based experiences. However, there are some exceptions and particularly one poem, titled "The Second Coming", which almost aroused a public scandal, because the poetess satirically deals with President Lyndon Johnson's visit to Australia. She uses the event to criticize the dependence of the Australians on the USA and to ridicule their servile attitude towards a man who represents the modern business world, which is ready to send young people to war, so that the armament industry can make a profit.

"The Second Coming" begins in the best manner of English mock-epic poetry and Auchterlonie's satire is an embittered attack on man's stupidity, on his readiness to be manipulated by appearances:

> Listen! Far-off the sacred engine hums
> Warning the people that the saviour comes!

4.- Dorothy Auchterlonie Green in a letter to Mirko Jurak (31 January 1982). See: G.A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, Fontana/Collins, 1980 (1978), pp. 82-83.
5.- Dorothy Auchterlonie Green in a letter to Mirko Jurak (31 January 1982).
6.- Alec King, "The Look of Australian Poetry in 1967", *Meanjin Quarterly*, 25 (1968), p. 173. Robert Ward, "Occasional Poets", *Australian Book Review*, 7/5 (March 1968), p. 93. Among those critics who wrote favourably about her poetry when her collections appeared were Judith Roderiguez, Bruce Beaver and a few other critics.

The super-giant wings glide slowly down
To yield their burden to the expectant town.
The stairs ascend behind the door, concealed,
Johnson (or Jesus?) waits to be revealed...
Johnson it is: needless the brief dismay -
This tribute is within our means to pay.
("The Second Coming", 11. 5-12)

The title of this satire is borrowed from W.B. Yeats and the poem clearly suggests that this coming is not the coming of God but of "the worst (who)/Are full of passionate intensity". Those who protest against the visit are silenced by the police and "human sheep" who are "desperate to obey" receive Johnson with applause, although he is guilty of the deaths of young Australians who were sent to the Vietnam war.

Dorothy Auchterlonie unreservedly takes the side of those who do not accept decisions taken by politicians without any meditation on the consequences of their decisions, because it is an ordinary man who always pays the price for mistaken judgements. She was definitely bothered by this question, because she also mentioned this topic in one of her letters to me:

> I cannot see how the ordinary people of the world are ever to have peace: to keep people in a state of tension and uncertainty is one sure way of controlling them: they will always cling to the *status quo* if they feel uneasy...[7]

Dorothy Auchterlonie developed the anti-war theme in a number of poems; "Questions for Kaspar", "Wilhemine and the Red Herring", "Overdue, Presumed Lost", for example. A startling effect is achieved by her turning a German nursery song about Kaspar into a protest song against war, "And clownish laughter, neatly timed,/ (will) Make Truth seem like a lie". Even if a war is won, one should not forget which values have been lost in this process. In a deeply felt elegy written in memoriam to James Auchterlonie, who died in April 1942 as a soldier, the poetess is asking herself how his last moments were spent and how he must have felt about not being able to realize his plans. Nevertheless, she ends this elegiac poem on an optimistic tone, the echo familiar from John Milton's sonnets:

Let not that grieve you, resting at last
In the dark, mothering sea whence life arose.
Where all shall return, where all, from sleeping fast,
Shall rise renewed, after a long repose.
(*STS*, 25-28)

7.- Dorothy Auchterlonie Green in a letter to Mirko Jurak (17 December 1981).

As long as man's highest values remain material wealth, social and political power, sensuality, and for the more educated ones a haven in the sciences or arts, Dorothy Auchterlonie sees moral decay and emotional sterility as the necessary consequence of such principles.

In some ways T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* is a forerunner of Auchterlonie's poems, as, for example, in "Night at the Opera" (*D*, 41-44), in which the story of Tristan and Iseult is made ridiculous by the speaker's commentary on their behaviour. Modern Tristan's shield is his cheque-book, he cannot hurry to Iseult because he has meetings to attend; Iseult is "really very keen/To work at some deserving charity", but she spends her time having coffee-parties, organizing balls, and so forth. Wasted, empty lives of modern men arouse anger in Dorothy Auchterlonie, anger which was the result of her love for Australia and generally for human beings. But the truth is hard to bear and Dorothy Auchterlonie was not the only modern Australian writer who was misunderstood and attacked by Australian reviewers. In one of her letters she told me some interesting facts about Patrick White and Judith Wright, which are extremely illustrative of her own situation:

> I have been having considerable correspondence from Patrick White lately, that is to say, considerable for him! He has been pleased with a couple of reviews I wrote and he told me so. There have been some very spiteful ones about his latest —a book of memoirs called *Flaws in the Glass*. It seems to me an extraordinary honest book; reviewers don't mind about his being frank about himself, but they don't like him telling the truth about other people.
> Both Patrick White and Judith Wright of course are very angry with their own country, largely because they have such a passion for it, and can't bear it to fall short of their ideal.[8]

In many of Dorothy Auchterlonie's poems love is either the central or the subsidiary theme. True love is holy, it should be cherished ("Drought", *D*, 29), it is irrevocable, and if a partner does not answer its call, God will punish him by taking it away from him ("Equation", *D*, 34-35). In a number of poems Auchterlonie connects the themes of eros and thanatos. Death can bring a revelation, as happens to a drowned girl in the poem "L'inconnue de la Seine" (*STS*, 7). Auchterlonie seldom uses a specific Australian background in her love poems (one of the exceptions is "Autumn Draught", *STS*, 9) but her meditation about man's love is frequently confronted with the speaker's knowledge that life is eventually bound to come "To/A/Stop", although the journey may have been longer than expected ("Next Station's Yours", *STS*, 33-35).

When women decide not to give birth to children, these are "The Hollow Years" (*STS*, 16), and when love promises are broken and fidelity becomes an obstacle in one's

8.- *Ibid.*

way of life, love turns into a grotesque, distorted form of behaviour, which has nothing to do with its true origin ("Madame Butterfly at Nagasaki", *STS*, 22).

The life and death of man is often contrasted in Auchterlonie's poems with the life and death of an animal or a plant (a theme so masterfully presented in L.N. Tolstoy's novella "Three Deaths"). The poetess suggests that the life of animals and plants is full of "simple joy and innocence", therefore a dolphin can show its love and service to man by simply being what it is ("The Dolphin, *D*, 1). Auchterlonie often combines the theme of love, as a symbol of life, with its theological meaning of *agape*, and also with *eros*, which makes some of her poems rather complex, functioning at the same time both on the human and on the metaphysical level.

In a cycle of three poems about a tree ("The Tree", *D*, 3-4; "The Second Tree", *D*, 5-7, "The Last Tree", *D*, 8-9), Dorothy Auchterlonie meditates on the relationship between man and God. She expresses the belief that the dichotomy between "I" and "Thou" was already planted as a tree in the Garden of Eden, when man's knowledge about himself, his self-awareness, was born. The second tree is the one on which Jesus was crucified and the third one, the tree on which Judas is supposed to have hanged himself. The tree thus links man with God; it is a witness of man's mortality but also of his free will, of his desire to love and to pity, to doubt, to dread and to dream. Man has shown his limitations, which are unavoidable but for the poetess nevertheless acceptable ("Resurrection", *D*, 18). Auchterlonie's reinterpretation of Biblical themes does not point only to this primeval source, but, again, to her enchantment with Metaphysical poetry and with Milton. Christ "stands aloof" and man is alienated from God, who leaves man to his fate, to his bitter end, which one should accept with stoicism ("The Lament of Branganc", *D*, 21). In her "Missa Brevis" (*D*, 28) the speaker accepts the role of a humble, devout believer, asking the Almighty to have mercy on mankind and grant it peace. The external framework of this "prayer" is secular, but the result of praying is man's spiritual regeneration:

> Mass ends, but still the singing bread
> Endures, and they who hear are fed.
> ("Missa Brevis", *D*, 28)

Through such an attitude to man and the universe the sensual, the physical, enters into a close relationship with the spiritual, the universal. Let Dorothy Auchterlonie herself conclude these random observations on her poetry with her answer to the theme of the Australian landscape in its denotative meaning and its figurative meaning, as the landscape of the human mind. I believe the passage proves that Dorothy Auchterlonie Green really had a global feeling of home:

> There is little that is specifically Australian in my verse and for most of my life I have never felt I really belonged to the place, though I have a passionate love of the countryside, the bush and the seashore. But I have always felt detached, not from individual people, but from the idea of belonging to a "nation". Mind you, I should find it difficult to take out nationality anywhere deliberately. I don't feel any great pull towards the

people in the country where I was born, though I have a great affection for the north-east corner of England. My own experience is that the 'at home' feeling cuts right across national boundaries: the people one has most in common with can be scattered about the globe, while those nearby are alien.[9]

9.- Dorothy Auchterlonie Green in a letter to Mirko Jurak (31 January 1981).