

THE DEFEAT OF TIME

QUARTET FOR THE END OF TIME

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In the period after the First World War Ezra Pound reached the conclusion that England as a central core-place of the creative arts was over, had become in fact “*uninhabitable*”. This was the moment of not just a creative liberation for Pound, but in many ways, a significant decision for the future writer and reader of poetry since then in that country. For with this decision Pound shifted the poetical carcass of the greats from underneath him, upturned like a rock the skull of Shakespeare and all other sacred names to allow the insect-images of a larger world beyond to scuttle out into the open. In 1945, in an American prison-camp near Pisa, Pound might have remembered his own words from *Canto 80*:

*Chesterton’s England of has-been
and why-not,
or is it all rust, ruin, death duties
and mortgages...*

Pound’s sudden disaffiliation and disgust with the English sensibility was accurate and more importantly a pivotal moment of perspicacity for the future of poetics in that country which, as he put it, “*cares only for the transient, trivial things*” and he warned England that “*some other mouth (perhaps another country) might be as ‘fair as hers’.*” And it is that ‘*other country*’ which a modern poet such as Mark Wilson has continually focused his eye on, thus allowing himself and his work to move away from the maddening insularity and limp aesthetics of England that Pound grew so weary of. But when the latter bemoaned the arrogant and self-serving obtuseness of English poetry he brought forth in spirit at least what the critic G.S. Fraser depicted as the “*British Poundians*” — a somewhat ineffable group of poets who comprehended and felt most the great technical innovations Pound invented, his highly serious principles of the forms of the imagination, which has allowed a poet like Wilson to in-tear the membrane of his own poetics.

It might also be said though that any one reviewing this book should already be 70 or 80 years out of date, for Wilson, like Pound in his first long great poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, is attempting to write poems still “*out of key with his time*”, striving “*to resuscitate the dead art/ of poetry; to maintain the ‘sublime’ in the old sense*”, and in the shadow of this tradition, he is consistently successful. But it is also medieval literature and especially Troubadour poetry which have clearly had a huge impact on Wilson’s imagination, the Troubadours who of course lauded love, especially that of the unrequited kind. The poet writes of it in the beautiful poem ‘*The Garden*’, drawing forth his own lady out of the shadows:

*So: in a cirrus of foliage,
utterly choked,
stands the apostolic gateway.
Diffident, you reach out a diffident hand.*

It is a hand you sense that will still be reaching out in a century’s time, statue to statue, a stone-glove to stone-glove, feigning... The only outcome naturally to any such unrequited love-affair is acknowledged at the end of the poem: “*So I must accept your promulgation of refusal as if / it were a gold-sealed papal-bull / issued to some maligned free- / thinker in a more-or-less: comparably / soulless age.*” Appearance is a Mask is a theological notion is an ‘icon’ that Wilson seeks to explore to the full, but

rather it is only a 'mask' in this book that struggles to feign the faces of the secondary, subsidiary dummies of Wilson's own imagination, those he depicts as the 'god-men', who, century after century, in attempting to de-mystify evil, *philosophize* instead the charred rib of Satan back into its original match and turn Hell into a mere spark again, before fire and flames take back their sustenance from the ashes of all post-biblical bones:

*...the lacerated ones,
survivors of apocalyptic. Holy
stragglers inching across scorched
plains to distant Ariel.*

Wilson's Cross is, today, infested with eschatological woodworm. His church constructed of matchsticks and unable to withstand the weight of the papyrus that first created it. It is the guilt of sin squeezed from what Janos Pilinszky depicted as the "disaster-centre" of the modern world that this poet feels compelled to confront, the tragedies which have ruined nature and constructed an arch in time which man has called *History*, under which the unforgiven and the damned are unable to ever walk free of. Wilson writes of the death camps and of those who crawl still uselessly through the mud of man's misinterpretations, of the crazed dictators ("Herod Hitler Pol Pot whoever/ working the damned crowd" — *Massacre of the Innocents*), those who in the end are still attempting to plug Hell's blood-geysers with their thumbs, and failing. Wilson's poetry is clearing the path for a better understanding and rationalizing of the *aperçus* and metaphysical puzzles of theology, especially when he questions how his 'Messiah' fits into it all. He writes of religion not as any kind of an intellectual impasse, but as a basis for both an ancient *and* modern reformulation of Christ in piety, for either we see an 'idol' as an inspired prejudice to overcome, or merely, like Wilson, we shape that idol from the clay of our own intuitive understanding of theology. The only question therefore to ask, say, a theologian, priest or (in this case) a poet is where we can exactly find a greater understanding of Christ. Is it amid the grinding and mechanical histrionics of a priest at mass? or merely by attempting to pincer Christ's own body between two praying palms, or simply as this poet has attempted, by making him once more part of a modern 'theatre-of-necessity' ('*Ecce Homo*'), a Christ once more capable of by-passing the institutional ego of man in the church, and whose death may or may not '...make tomorrow's papers' but who will of course go on existing regardless.

Religion has failed and must naturally go on failing, for until the universe is swung free of its own newly discovered strings, every planet by man explored and/or the energy of science by God de-energized, a poet like Wilson will *have* to go on adjusting those props that have, so far, been our *only* understanding to the cultural-systems of belief that neither ourselves nor God seem truly to recognize. Wilson is left to grow accustomed to a reality that:

*It is left for me to remove
sensitive steel nails, apply fragrant
herbs and opium vinegar to disguise the
smell and the pain respectively.
(Midlands Crucifixion)*

The time-zone for Christ's wounds will elapse of course only after the duration of religion itself has expired, when man locates a suitable, prosthetic scab of his own, to return the cross back onto the arms of those aborigines who first shouldered its branches clear of the forest. In *Tears and Saints*, E.M. Cioran wrote: "God benefits from the peripheries of logic", a notion that Wilson might agree with I suspect, especially when he asks himself: "for who really knows the way to Earthly paradise, who can show / me the real road to / celestial cities?" (*Midlands Crucifixion*). The poet is also concerned with the Armageddon, which according to the Bible is, in brief, the site of a battle during the *end times*, variously interpreted as either a literal or symbolic location. The Messiah will return to earth and defeat the Antichrist, then Satan will be put into a bottomless pit or psychological abyss for one thousand years,

known as the Millennial Age. Which leads us to wonder what religious poetry *is* exactly, and if Wilson's poetry can be described as such? yes, if what we mean by 'religious' poetry consists in fictionalizing a super/future self in a time *before* death as well as *after*; if it is also true that Pascal's '*grandeur of things*' can be accounted for in words, and if today *and* in the future a poet like Wilson is prepared to admit in his imagination to finger-tipping the Braille of God's name in the dirt of every known and unknown planet in the universe, and not just our own. In his poem '*The Circumcision*' he states clearly what some aspects of religious allegiance mean to him "*A wounding as the elect's / badge, the tribal scar of / holy belonging*".

Wilson's approach to revealing God in language has something to do with how Geoffrey Hill suggested it in his great early poem (*Shiloh Church, 1862*) when he writes "*Whose passion was to find out God in this his natural filth, voyeur of sacrifice, a slow / bloody unearthing of the God-in-us*". And it is this "*unearthing*" that Wilson himself feels most comfortable in:

*So this is you: the resolute-implacable,
surrounded by jutting beards
enmeshed with
religious offal...
(Ecce Homo)*

In another poem '*The Maker of Masks*' in which he states "*God is dead? / No wonder he has / become so religious*", it is the sound of the atom splitting and seeping blood, Christ's. In dealing with both the historical Christ and his own actual living Christ, Wilson still, it is clear, believes in his answers, even if it involves tipping the biological mask of his own human face to reveal him. In the poem '*The Unclean*' we witness the cold and insoluble mental struggle through the contamination of the world that has reduced sin to something like a bacterial reaction, to merely "*Sinning microbes literally / crawling all over us*". But for Wilson, like for Wallace Stevens, to remove any of the theological players from the imagination would be a disaster for the creative mind, for just as the atheist only *feigns* his interest in the news of the celestial death of Christ, likewise this poet realizes what Stevens best summed up when he wrote "*The death of Satan was a tragedy / for the imagination.*" (*Esthétique du Mal*). The ultimate task of any true 'religious' poet is *not* to accept mortality, while accepting the mortal negation of theodicy to survive the duplicity, the haunting of both the phantom of God *and* doubt.

It is also through the celestial pitch of music that God is sought and sifted. Cioran wrote: "*When we did not have a name, we must have heard everything. Music exists only as remembrance of paradise and of the fall.*" Music of course can annihilate time and space utterly, to leave its *final* 'note' but a teardrop rolling down the cheeks of the deaf, as all human error is reversed and Christ's crown of thorns turns back into flowers. "*A serenity of movement without / movement. Your opponent all but a whiff of nitrogen. Just the chance to fade gracefully. Your / atoms' supreme dance de-escalating / into a kind of anti-choreograph.*" ('*Tabula Rasa*', after Arvo Pärt). Wilson obviously delights in such oddly subversive responses to music, as if imagining what the metaphysician hums when propounding the Alpha and Omega of the soul. It is clear that for this poet the act of composing music is akin to a God creating a planet, amid the profound absentia and luminous vassals of the universe, or what the French poet Paul Valéry so clearly revelled in, the "*sensation of being everything and the certitude of being nothing*".

In this collection, the poems concerning music are undoubtedly among the very best, such as the opening one '*Tabula Rasa*' the music of which, as suggested to me, is powerful enough to lend strings to stones, make sonorous and re-tongue the mute, while reconstructing a cubist gramophone from the bones of the human skull. In this poem each note appears like a strategic chess piece in an end-of-the-world game between sound and silence:

And then the descent-cum-ascent.

*That interminable endgame, elision of
lengthening scales world without end.*

Music for Wilson at least seems to transcend the atom, re-birth the ancestry of anyone who truly *hears*, otherworldly enough in its impact to glass-jar the foetus of all *listening* beings, while suspending and emptying the soul as if a palace or great echoing hall to reveal now only abandoned celestial statues wearing our own ears as headphones. For human *personae* seems in this poem (as in maybe all great pieces of music) once more reduced to mere possibility, splitting our personality into a flute of bones, a *nerve-instrument* to transfix our limbs into a time in which sound itself is regulated by the self-dials of experience, the suddenly turned down volume of the ringing of the tinnitus caused by the Big-Bang inside of man's head, leaving God then as the *only* conductor to "*Espouse Kineticism*" and to leave "*indefatigable personae always / five or seven moves ahead of / yourself, your invisible / opponent.*" When Nietzsche wrote "*I cannot differentiate between tears and music*" I am sure he was talking of a response that Wilson might also be drawn to. Mark Wilson's poetics are not so easily summed up though, for while religion, music and time often combine to create a chrysalis this poet tenaciously seeks to climb free from, such grand notions for poetry offer up here a hybrid compulsion to challenge the reader, to induce what Wallace Stevens sought in creativity, to reach a place where the poet becomes a "*appreciatory creator of values and beliefs*" (Stevens). For in so finishing this collection, the reader should maybe check out Pound's own lines when he asked himself: '*Will people accept them? i.e. these songs*'. The answer is undoubtedly yes, for Wilson is hell-bent on continuing what Pound confirmed is the writer's task, to pre-date and reorganize the requirements of the age like in his poem '*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*':

*The age demanded an image
of its accelerated grimace,
something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace.*

And maybe, like Wilson, other poets will follow in such a singular vein, those who might also comply with his visions of the universe "*through kaleidoscopic time*" so that we the reader might learn to be refracted also "*slowly beyond our wildest / contrapuntal / visions*".

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