

BETTER QUICK THAN DEAD:  
ANNE WILKINSON'S POETRY

Robert Lecker

When Anne Wilkinson says that "two conditions of man are fixed: / the quick and the dead,"<sup>1</sup> she has in mind not one conflict but the whole set of polar oppositions which govern her poetry and poetic. By interpreting the themes, images, and symbols aligned with these extremes we can understand this: Wilkinson's passion is for the quick, the actual lived moment of sensual phenomenal experience; but that very passion arises from and is sustained by her anxious recognition of the dead, the forces of time and tradition which limit experience and threaten the ecstasy of life-flux. Thus she describes herself as "dismembered by two worlds" (p. 6). As a "hearer of water" (p. 20) she listens to life, opens herself to the river, flings herself into movement, sings that "NOW is forever" (p. 90). However, this abandonment turns paradoxical: her ultra-conscious attempt to seize the instant forces Wilkinson into an awareness of that same instant's passing, and of her inevitable movement towards death. The conflict between the quick and the dead becomes a question about time, and for the poet that question breeds apprehension. As she says in "Poem of Anxiety," she rides "the rim of danger" (p. 12) — the line between the fixed and the free, between what she was and what she wants to be. These are the tensions I want to explore, first by moving freely through all the poems and then by looking more closely at a few in particular.

In her vision of "the quick" Wilkinson presents us with a remarkably consistent positive world containing its own seasons, colours, climates, and inhabitants. Here, everything is vital, fluid, and pulsating with life and creation. Spring and summer are eternal. The everpresent sun, "aloft and hot with husbandry," (p. 5) illuminates "a world of sugar . . . / Springful and swollen with love" (p. 5). "Animal sensual man" (p. 57) "inhales the breath of flowers" (p. 60) or sees "gush the juice and seed of summer" (p. 132) as "lovers rushed with sap relax their thighs" (p. 142). The season represents "a coming together — water and sun / In summer's first communion" (p. 111). Again and again Wilkinson merges with this great hot flow. "Running with the juice of stems" (p. 45), she becomes the season and, as a plant within it, thrives on its light. "Light is my love!" (p. 26) she says, "I do not know, I cannot see in the

<sup>1</sup>Anne Wilkinson, *Collected Poems*, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 36. All page references cited in my text are to this edition.

dark" (p. 28). For her, knowledge is the passion for light, and poetic knowledge means vision derived through all that she connects with light: sun inspires, heat releases, water fertilizes, green overcomes. Her breath is "as live / And green as Irish grass" (p. 44), her body the "green reed growing" (p. 15) from the earth. But above all it is a jungle green that marks the poet's ideal, for that is a green which never fades, the symbol of an eternal heat wave in which the quick could continue forever. Not surprisingly, she admits: "my lens is grafted from a jungle eye" (p. 72). An important pattern begins to emerge: Wilkinson aligns creativity and life with everything "south of north" (p. 56).

If what is south stands for fecund nature, it stands also for human growth. In short, the quick is a childhood world full of innocence, wonder, and spontaneity. Not yet knowing fear, children go "walking in the jungle, / Loving and sweet with snakes" (p. 12), or one "swings higher and higher" never bothering to "test the ascent" (p. 23). Unconcerned with time, children inhabit a continuous present in which:

Minds are here, not stars away  
And fine nerves sing  
Like wire stretched from pole to pole  
In a prairie wind. (p. 92)

Unlike the adult,

A child can clock  
An era on the arc  
Of a day in the sun. (p. 66)

Because he is so intimately involved with the moment and because his consciousness develops through a sensual participation in the flux of the physical world, the child represents for Wilkinson a kind of creative ideal. The best "poets are fishermen" (p. 93) who like "hungry children cast their nets" to catch "the NOW in all things past" (p. 60). Throughout the poetry we find her seeking the uncluttered childhood experience, the direct apprehension of phenomena as they appear in the present. In "Lens" she tells us that "my working eye is muscled / With a curious tension, / Stretched and open / As the eyes of children; / Trusting in its vision" (p. 48), and elsewhere she emphasizes that "child and poet wind / A one-day clock. 'NOW,' / It strikes, 'NOW is forever.'" (p. 90).

This phenomenological perspective is also a primitive one. Wilkinson's children, like noble savages, are innocently at one with nature; they inhabit a lush hospitable garden removed from cultural imperatives. The implication here is that creation (especially aesthetic creation) is purest and most authentic when it arises from a primal consciousness ignorant of the Fall and unburdened by questions of fate or salvation. The kingdom of the senses is not a post-Edenic world of thought and explanation, but a hedonistic, almost pagan world of preliterate communication. It is a verbal realm of folk tales,

lullabies, nursery rhymes, and ballads. Together, these utterances unite to produce a lyrical universe based upon the metaphor of song. At the centre of this universe, it is the poet herself who sings about an ideal creative and imaginative world with a green sunlit garden, a river, the "fanfare of flowers" (p. 59), and "intimations of fertility" (p. 56). All nature echoes her song: "Ringed with chatter" (p. 15) or "an oratorio rehearsed by treble birds" (p. 59), "the spangled noise of grass" (p. 89), or the "hubbub in the meadow" (p. 39), Wilkinson's own "skin is minstrel" (p. 68). When she advises us to "open an ear to the earth" (p. 21), she means that we should open ourselves to a multi-sounded message of passion ("love that's beating under you" [p. 21]), but she also means that we should participate in the physical sensations which tie us to the world and make our sensing bodies the final means to truth. The quick is not mind but body: "With sense alive you're wiser" (p. 127).

"North of south" everything is different. In a short poem significantly entitled "South, North," she makes the contrast between the quick and the dead quite clear:

Countries where the olive  
And the orange ripen  
Grow their men  
On slopes unpuritan;  
Joy a food  
Deserving rites of measure.

Where winter pulls the blind  
A bliss as keen—  
On native stone of sin  
Cold men whet their pleasure  
Cussed by the black north wind.

The first stanza describes a southern realm of freedom characterized by growth and ripening — process warmed by sunshine, exuberance becoming sustenance, the harvest gained through nature unrestrained. But the north is the home of men blinded — the window shut to daylight. This is the frozen Puritan wasteland where everything sleeps and dies, where "polar days wake black" (p. 39) to a moonlit land of snow. The Puritan's bliss is artificial and covert, keened, like the blade on a knife by the grinding stone, whetted with the unhealthy, paradoxical pleasure derived from killing joy. To Wilkinson "north" also means "the barren city" (p. 109) — culture, tradition, and heritage; blood ties calling from the grave. Because she associates blood with time and memory, it symbolizes everything opposed to the instantaneous vision of the garden. She aligns this blood symbolism with redness, until the colour itself means duration. As soon as she thinks of the past, Wilkinson's summer is stifled by autumn. In "Summer Acres," for example, she remembers a holiday resort owned by her family ("these acres breathe my family" [p. 3]). But placed in the context of this tradition, her summer

memories cannot survive. Inevitably she hears "the whine of autumn in the family tree" and realizes that she is "the child of old men heavy with honour / . . . shaking their scarlet flags." Knowing this, her "heart dyes red." In poem after poem she is checked by this "commonwealth of blood, red / And sluiced with recollection" (p. 45), or she fights with "the polar pull of blood, the needle / Pointing North to recognition" (p. 9). And in the north, she finds only winter, and she calls it "the lost red syllable" (p. 68), or she personifies time as a tiger and gives him "crimson soles / And crimson linings" to deck his ears (p. 33). Finally, she mates blood with stone:

My blood is a clot in the stone  
The blood of my heart is fused to a pit in the rock. (p. 20)

North is the "season of possum death" (p. 39) — with the climate, the body sleeps. The image of the possum suggests that there is something feigned about this human hibernation. It is not a truly rejuvenating animal-vegetable rest, but an artificially imposed denial of external nature, a sleep induced by culture. Snow becomes an anaesthetist, a reality-killer whose "vocation is to etherize" and spread "drifts of chloroform" (p. 5). Sleep is a barbiturate — an overdose is fatal. In "To A Sleep Addict" Wilkinson advises an habitual dreamer to "turn your compass from / The point of sleep. / Let the fixed pole wait" (p. 103). The fixed pole, of course, is death, and sleep, because it points to death, is intimately bound to extinction. The wind from the polar regions is death's servant. Confronted by it, Wilkinson loses touch with herself and the fluid world of life goes sterile: ". . . a north / Wind blew, and I was lost. It blew / A milch cow dry" (p. 113). Above all, the north is a moral realm of reason and thought which threatens the "wide green world" of the senses "where, in curve of meadow, / Lovers, touching, lie" (p. 61). Unlike the innocence of childhood's spring and summer, autumn and winter signify adult experience "dulled by ritual" (p. 111), resignation in the face of the Fall: "Adam and Evening and the apple, red / And waiting for the hollow of a hand" (p. 8). "Once," Wilkinson remembers, "I quite forgot the flood" (p. 135). But grown older she knows that "winter is Jehova" (p. 58), and in her quest for the "church of grass" (p. 61) she comes to reject the "false god's altar" which symbolizes only "the rites of trivia" (p. 94). Instead, she would

Teach one commandment,  
'Mind the senses and the soul  
Will take care of itself,  
Being five times blessed.'

In "Christmas Eve" she presents us with an involved critique of Christian tradition. On her way to mass, she passes through a park full of vagabonds and, identifying with them, confronts the reality of Christmas Eve:

I am tied to men whose mourning  
Wears out benches in the park.

Ironically, "the day salutes goodwill" as she experiences a "community of tears" and listens to shivering derelicts "bitten / White with grief." Later, the church chorus sings, but she hears only the sound of her conscience asking "what shepherd guides the sheep?" Yet she cannot sustain the vision of a world without God — that would mean anarchy ("All the people / Riddled with the peak and mob of fear"). Terrified by her thoughts, she locks out the vagrants and prepares to rest secure:

'Tinsel angels guard my bed,  
The house is warm,  
The witch is chained to the barn,  
God rest us merry gentlemen.'

As we know, Wilkinson herself is by no means interested in locking out reality — quite the contrary — but in this poem, by casting herself in a foreign role, she is able to show more convincingly that the social order (symbolized here by the warm house and church chorus) is an enslaving force which works against man's natural instincts by providing him with a shelter from present realities.

If we return to "Summer Acres" for a moment, we can see that as she writes about tradition, images of restriction appear. In the prose memoir which accompanies the collected poems, she tells us that the family property at Roches Point included "eighty acres of parkland" and "farmland or maple woods or cedar swamps." But in the poem, her memories of the varied countryside do not evoke the summer feeling of freedom and fluidity because the vision, coloured as it is by ancestral thoughts, can only be one of oppression. The poet's eyes are "wired to the willow," her "heart is boughed by the cedar," and her "ears are tied to the tattle of water." Nature itself seems aged when it is aligned with history and time:

How tired, how tall grow the trees  
Where the trees and the family are temples  
Whose columns will tumble, leaf over root to their ruin.

The family tree means death and the denial of life in the present.

Predictably, the same themes emerge in another poem about this age-old family resort. In "Roches Point" Wilkinson describes the property in the following words:

This land rings,  
In stone of its houses,  
In cedar and sod,  
The myths of my kin.

The land rings out as it announces a settlement of stone buildings, but at the same time it encloses these settled kin — rings them inextricably in. The voice of ancestral land is at once a symbol of imprisonment. To complete this picture

of dark harshness, Wilkinson discovers "deadly nightshade" flowering in the woods around an ominous lake described as "the silky waters / Where our epochs drowned." Ideally, she would "shut the door against return" and live oblivious of eternity in a present devoid of stone. She would destroy the puritan who "cleaves to rock" and "projects a whip to shrivel those / Who over ten admit the sap / That rushes them" (p. 29).

Very few of Wilkinson's poems are entirely negative. Usually, she puts the quick beside the dead, thereby highlighting the contrasting themes with which she is obsessed. In "Easter Sketches, Montreal," she celebrates the resurrection of nature from the "dying snows" and the rebirth of man in "the melting hour" when "rocks are split by spring." The most important image in the poem is that of crucifix-topped Mount Royal as a "campanile of rock" which "steeple the town." By picturing the mountain as a bell tower and church steeple, Wilkinson characteristically identifies religion with everything high or above earth. Located as it is in the structural centre of the poem, though, the mountain also symbolizes the transition from winter to spring. While its top points upwards to "northern lights," its base is rooted to the earth and surrounded by "spears of grass." Ironically, the "March of Easter" parades the death of God, not resurrection, for only when "the frosty Lord" of "the long north wind" dies can the air be "seeded fresh." Consequently, spring becomes "the cracking God" or "the melting God"; and the poet suggests that in order to participate in the season of "our nativity," we must, with the sun, symbolically "kill our father," be he God, or man, or both.

Of all the poems in which Wilkinson evolves a symbolism of height and depth, the most revealing is appropriately entitled "The Up and Down of it." The poem describes an imaginary meeting on a staircase between the poet and a man who "had the gall / To swear his name was God." As we might expect, the man's face is a "heavenly red" and he is travelling upwards to a predictable home — "the belfry," later called "his tower." Wilkinson, on the other hand, is returning from the tower, the suggestion being that she has rejected the notion of heaven and placed her faith in a religion of the earth. The earthborn religion allows her to be imaginative; she counters the man's time-worn story with a fresh one to suit the moment. Then mumbling "a humble spell / I'd learned on earth from men," she lets God (who by now is "squeezed against the wall, afraid") pass on, and "two steps at a time" jumps her way to grass. She ends the poem with an explicit image of herself as a child running breathlessly to meet the earth. This is not the first time she has linked imagination with childhood, but here, by assuming the consciousness of a child who knows a good story when she hears one, she suggests that the word of God is a lie, and not a very interesting one at that.

Wilkinson's children can be creative because they are as yet unburdened by all that the tower stands for. The north is merely their winter playground. Nowhere is this more apparent than in "Winter Sketch." The first half of the poem describes a cold winter scene as it is experienced by grown men. The

ploughman denies the present as he "steers his dreaming over the hill / To the faraway hour that carries his frostbite home." In the suburbs, other "men walk shy" . . . "bound by the black extravagance of night." Only the children remain alive and free. Theirs are "the only hands whose thumbs work free" to create snowmen and "rename a carrot, nose." They alone can sing, "'I dare the snow my wings to keep.'"

The quick-dead dichotomy is summed up best in what may be Wilkinson's finest poem. In "Letter to My Children: Postscript," she not only discusses the conflict central to all her poetry, but does so in a way that amounts to the statement of a poetic. The first two lines are rich in meaning:

With winter here my age  
Must play with miracles.

On one level, the poet is describing her own adulthood (her age) as the winter of her years and suggesting that personal survival depends upon her ability to retain a childlike sense of wonder. The need for play is imperative, not only because it provides a release from an overly serious and stifling mature world but also because it is naturally imaginative, spontaneously in touch with magic. The implication here has appeared before: the child is, by the very nature of his "play with miracles," an unselfconscious poet inhabiting the same realm of creation that Wilkinson herself explores. Yet, at the same time, the idea of "playing with" miracles carries a negative connotation, as if in her adulthood she can no longer accept miracles at face value, but must alter them to suit her needs. In this case, the miracle is no longer food for the poet, but merely a type of pacifier. With this in mind, we can see that the poet's "age" is also her epoch — a social order suffering from the symbolism of winter. Driven to escape itself, society places its faith in religion, in the miracles performed by Christ. But this kind of play is not magical; it is merely an idle game, a false pageant made for an adult audience insensitive to creation.

The first sentence of the poem announces the contrast between youth and age that will be developed in the poem at large. The letter to her children is a lesson about how to remain young, but as such it is also a statement about how poets themselves should see. Above all, she would wish for "five full and fathomed senses, / Precision instruments / To chart the wayward course" through life. The senses can give us direction, but, more importantly, they put us in direct contact with the physical world. The ear lets us "swing to hot percussion jazz / Of insects" and "dance / To carnal charivari / Broadcast from distended throats of frogs." The eye shows us the "fruit and feast of colour" and lets us "gorge on pigment squeezed / From barley fields." With touch, we can "clock the pulse / Beat of a leaf," or by smell "catalogue the flowers / Fighting for precedence in June." And last, by tongue, we can know "the juice and seed of summer." Wilkinson's statement is insistent: find the

world that is "green / With childhood," . . . "stalk the landscape for the contour / Of a fern." In five words she states the essence of her poetic:

Touch everything available  
To consciousness.

Only by touching everything can we know the quick from the dead. Constant to this belief, she juxtaposes the positive with the negative and so presents us with a poem that tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive. She contrasts the music of the garden with the "dissonance / Of urban sound" and speaks of a town devoid of sunlight, "adrift in fog" and marked by "the lowering of evening song." To grow old is to become part of this spreading darkness, in other words, to "tar with age." It is to hear "the moon / Scratch the slate of midnight water," or "the loneliness of curlews crying" as "the windy autumn blows." Age is the time of night

When stars show up for duty  
On the dim lit wards of winter  
And breath is everywhere white with veils  
And the vows of nuns.

But Wilkinson wants no chastity cloistered from the garden, nor does she want to dream. The poem ends with a question about slumber:

'Sleep well'—I wonder why  
We harp on sleep, our certainty.

She would "turn the message inside out" by making it essential to "wake well," to "listen / With immaculate ear / To what the bells of matin say." As we shall see, it is not the certainty of the collective "we" but the uncertainty of the individual "I" that energizes the poet. Each hour should be an awakening, each day an individual adventure.

Even with this final affirmation, however, the poem remains deeply problematic. It suggests the paradox which haunts all of Wilkinson's poetry: if maturity signifies time and the passing of time means death, how can she ignore the implications of the fact that she herself is no longer a child? In truth, she knows all too well that despite her identification with spring, time is moving her further and further away from it. This realization has a dual effect. First, it forces her into the anxious recognition that she is caught between the quick and the dead (middle age), and, secondly, it confronts her with the need to see death more positively — to find a meaning beyond the grave. In fact, her most positive poems are actually prompted by this anxiety. The very fact that she feels so compelled to "defend the quick" (p. 36) suggests a degree of private uncertainty. Often, this uncertainty is conveyed through the image of a person stranded between two worlds or time states. In "The Tightrope," she compares life to a balancing act on a string which is "thin as silk." Prompted by



her own metaphor, she imagines the natal cord itself as a symbol of life's precariousness:

My feet are walking walking  
Since my mother cried  
And the doctor cut the cord  
And stranded me here.

Finally, we see her "breathless" on another line, this time a "long street." Significantly, she is "waiting," presumably for some direction to relieve the "teeter" of a tottering life. Indeed, her situation perfectly images the classic condition of existential *angst* in which man finds himself forced to choose a route through a signless universe stretched between life and death.

The same predicament appears in a poem fittingly entitled "After Reading Kafka." It begins with these words:

Here at my door I swing between obsessions:  
Hall by day, corridor by night.  
I am obsessed with exits . . . .

Once again, we are presented with the poet's picture of herself as a being who, treading a narrow path, is torn between the extremities of night and day. The images also suggest that the movement of life resembles the swing of a pendulum marking the time between life and death. Wilkinson's obsession with exits expresses her need to escape from this confrontation with time, and, as such, the uncertain movement in the hallway represents her constant awareness of the conflict between age and youth: of which is she more properly a part — daylight or darkness? Throughout the poem, she is possessed by these themes and the despairing thought that she may no longer have the safety of a single space which without doubt she can call her home. After all, it is because she is unadmitted to her own doorway that she is forced reluctantly to make the hall her home:

The hall is my terrain. I pace  
Its length from where I am to who I'll be  
When the sun falls from the sill.

She paces; she is imprisoned. Sometimes she is lost ("Half-way home or where?") and calls out for a guiding hand ("Signal / If you touch an opening in the line to home!"). But most of all she laments her fading youth ("I dallied, lost / The white years in a wink"), and with this fact she connects her greatest fear: the poetic light may also be dimming.

The time of day which most appropriately reflects the metaphors of tightrope, street, or hallway is noon — the hour poised between night and day. In "Poem of Anxiety," she ties the theme of anxiety to this time in particular. One way she makes the link is through the structure of the poem. The six verses work in pairs: the first two deal with morning, the second two with noon,

and the last two with night. As the poet moves from stanza to stanza, she imagines herself on a walk through the jungle. This voyage, identified as it is with the passage of time, represents the larger journey through life. It begins with the intimate, exuberant contact between the child and sunlit nature. In the morning, while her "whole and body being sings / In dapple of day jungle" she "laughs / To meet a death." Being unconscious of death, the child can really live. But when the land is "spoked with noon," she becomes an adult riding "the rim of danger" and for the first time aware of her "foe, / The striped, discerning tiger" of time who "stretches with the shadows." Then, night comes on as an animal "at large in the jungle" — the tiger is fully awake. She is overcome by fear "lest I kiss or claw his eye." The final irony is subtle: Wilkinson is afraid of time attacking her, afraid that she might attack it, and afraid that she might embrace it (love itself has become unsure). In short, she is utterly confused about how to approach the thought of her death. But it is precisely this uncertainty which keeps her alive. She refuses to surrender herself to darkness; she insists that the tightrope be walked.

Clearly Wilkinson does not want to become part of the "culturized" dead world that we have watched her consistently deny. She wants to "outwit the dark" (p. 26) by resolving the quick-dead (sun-moon, nature-culture, summer-winter) conflict. For her it is of the utmost importance that death be not final but fluid. This is why the philosophy and poetry of Empedocles has had such an influence upon her writing.<sup>2</sup> Empedocles describes life as an endless transformation of matter from one state into another. Because this process continues indefinitely, the destruction of any form is simultaneously the creation of another. Within this ceaselessly changing system, man himself is seen as part of a chain of metamorphoses linking the animal and the vegetable to the elements of earth, wind, fire, and water. To a poet who equates life with perpetual flux, Empedocles' explanations can only be appealing, for by asserting that life is essentially movement and change, he effectively cancels the division between the quick and the dead by making the quick eternal. Knowing this, we can see that Wilkinson's frequent identification with inanimate matter can be extremely positive. It signifies her willingness to participate in an endlessly cyclical process of life; it does not mean she capitulates to stasis.

In "Poem in Three Parts," for example, she presents us with three ways of understanding a stone. First, the stone is inspected by a geologist who merely "tells the time it has endured." This is the quality of fixity which is sought after by the collective ("Endurance, a virtue in itself, we say"). But there are "a few quiet men" apart from the social order who in the stone see "the cell's fragility." They can look beyond the narrow confines of their age to the time when the stone will have changed. Indeed, only a few possess the vision to realize that stone and body are one, and that

---

<sup>2</sup>Professor Smith has emphasized this connection in his introduction to the *Collected Poems*.

... Monday's child  
Makes Tuesday's vegetable  
And Wednesday petrifies  
The leaf to mineral  
While Friday sparks the whole in fire  
And Sunday's elements disperse  
And rise in air.

At the end of the poem, this message becomes entirely personal. As she regards the stone, Wilkinson sees that she is a part of it:

The stone in my hand  
IS my hand  
And stamped with tracings of  
A once greenblooded frond,  
Is here, is gone, will come,  
Was fire, and green, and water,  
Will be wind.

Here, she proposes the Empedoclean solution to the life-death conflict in a manner which is eminently in keeping with her faith in phenomena: the stone becomes a multi-levelled image fusing antithetical physical and temporal states into an instantaneously apprehended symbol of existence. The perception of the stone equals the picture of the poet's conscious thought. The shift to first-person narration in the third part of the poem also reminds us that for her the growth of individual poetic vision goes hand in hand with a rejection of culture.

In "Nature Be Damned" this rejection comes to be abruptly stated. At first, however, Wilkinson speaks to us as one from "within the barren city / Where artificial moons pull no man's tide." But soon she disowns the perverted culture which insists that it is "natural" — she turns her back on the "undertaker's false green sod" and the gardener's "false tin tree." Most of all, she repudiates Christian faith: "And so I damn the font where I was blessed, / Am unbeliever." Only after she has freed herself from dogmatism and artificiality can her real faith in flux emerge:

... we're kin in appetite;  
Tree, bird in the tree and I.  
We feed on dung, a fly, a lamb  
And burst with seed  
Of tree, of bird, of man,  
Till tree is bare  
And bird and I are bone  
And feaster is reborn  
The feast, and feasted on.

There is an environmental warning and a social critique contained in these words as well. The "feaster" is not only the poet who welcomes the idea of returning as food, but also the consumer society which gobbles up nature and,

by ignoring the food chain cycle, is ultimately forced to consume itself. The final sense of release is in part born from the poet's belief that this destroyer must eventually be destroyed, regardless of its faith in "progress."

By providing Wilkinson with one way of approaching death, Empedocles also suggests to her a means by which she can discover her identity. Within the context of his system, it is no longer necessary for the poet to define herself strictly in relation to the present, but only to become conscious of her identity existing in various forms throughout time. Thus Empedocles ultimately explains to Wilkinson her uncertainty in the hallway: too often she has looked for a single room when in fact she belonged to several. This is the awareness she exhibits in a poem whose title repeats Empedocles' phrase, "I was born a boy, and a maiden, a plant . . ." We find her in "one of innumerable rooms" as she prepares to write a poem "on good white genesis of paper." But her attempt to create anew is transformed into a poem about the thought that there *is* nothing new, that everything that will be has been. In this sense, as the title aptly indicates, she is actually rewriting Empedocles and, by extension, once was him. Quite pointedly, she tells us that "I was a poet then." Once we understand this identification, the poem becomes more accessible. Like Empedocles, Wilkinson proceeds to write about all that she has been — she leaves her present room to visit the innumerable ones she has known. And so we find her as "a miner / Deep in the hills of the sea," or as "a maiden all forlorn / A long long time ago." She remembers that "I was a plant," and, as she remembers, she becomes the plant: "My roots are running with the juice of stems." Finally, she evokes the name of Empedocles himself — "presumed Olympic sire" — and suggests that he has but one peer, "the man who stands, knowing he swam in mud." Implicit in this statement is the notion that man has evolved from and will return to the sea: "Portage / From the sea is in the salt of my sweat," she says, and she reminds us, elsewhere, that "once upon a briny while ago / The sea was home . . ." (p. 31). Always she tries to alert us to the sea — not only to its message of movement, but also to the presence of that message within us.

Thus, we come full circle to where we first met this poet listening intently to water. Little has changed: she remains questioning, seeking, resolving, but, most of all, in touch. And we see that for her, the river in the garden is the ideal symbol of what she would have the poet be — a force touching everything through time. We also come back to her feeling the water within her. She speaks of it as her lover, the fluid passion of her life:

The lips of my lover can wear away stone,  
My lover can free the blocked heart;  
The leaf and the root and the red sap will run with lake water,  
The arms of my lover will carry me home to the sea. (p. 20)

Like her lover, Wilkinson has always been a traveller exploring, following the path to see.