

The Unitary Vision
of
Sylvia Oldroyd



Sebastian Hayes

The Unitary Vision of Sylvia Oldroyd

IN A NUMBER of her poems, Sylvia Oldroyd takes an ordinary object, an old scarf ('Spectrum'), a cap ('The Cap'), a piece of stone ('Thinking Stone'), a tree-trunk ('Touching Wood'), and allows it to reverberate, noting the results. Even when the objects are a good deal larger and less anonymous, the cliffs at Beachy Head, the tides at Dibden Bay, or are not objects at all, events, moments in time, much the same sort of thing applies. The resulting poem grows by accretion like geological layers or tree-rings rather than having a planned form. In like manner I have let my thoughts wander in writing this appraisal. ■

THIS IS the poetry of someone who is at once careful observer and carefree day-dreamer, someone who has the time and patience to fix an object or moment and then let it create ripples within the mind. In the conscious or the unconscious mind? Both or perhaps neither. Freud's unconscious is a trivial thing, a rag-bag of petty frustrations and disappointments located within a human being who thinks too much of herself. Sylvia Oldroyd is looking for a "deeper union, a stronger communion" (Eliot) : her consciousness transcends the barriers between things to merge imperceptibly into the groundswell of all existence. ■

THE SIMILES — or those that are successful — are not just clever analogies or ingenious cross-connections between disparate entities, they stem from a unified and unifying vision. In the poem 'Thinking Stone' the fingers stroking the stone are in some sense 'the same' as the inanimate water waves that have been rocking it for millennia. Fingers = waves. Nor is the mechanical world excluded since in Sylvia Oldroyd's vision wind turbines and ferry boats are not essentially different from rocks or tree trunks. Wind turbines are not just 'like' flowers, they actually *are* plants albeit of a novel kind, they are the shrubs of the industrial era which is ours, in their way just as valid, as 'natural', as rocks or shells. Mankind is completely irrelevant. The great machines, trains, wind turbines, ferries, power stations, are not deliberate creations of man, they are more like curious items thrown up by time and evolutionary processes, not essentially different from shells or pieces of slate. None of these objects, trees, stones, railways, are invented or designed : they are manifestations of something that is within and behind everything. For ultimately there is only one 'thing', translucent, multiform, volatile, unfixed yet definite, always changing into something else yet perpetually retaining its unique identity, *'Nature', 'World Soul, 'vital spirit', 'Tao'* ■

■

ONE NOTES the extreme reticence of the author : like a Jane Austen heroine we do not know what she looks like or much about her life even though the poems are intensely personal. ■

IT IS RARE to find a writer who reflects about life but makes a point of not taking sides, who abstains from reaching up and selecting from the shelf above one of the ready-made systems of thought on offer, Romanticism, Classicism, Christianity, Marxism &c. &c. Yet Sylvia Oldroyd *does* have a distinctive vision,

a personal 'take' on the world. The underlying philosophy is not my own view nor that of most my contemporaries — but is all the more interesting and stimulating for this very reason. It differs markedly from the modern, post-Romantic vision in that it is a unified and for that very reason ultimately an optimistic viewpoint, a world-view based on acceptance rather than dissatisfaction. Things are as they are — why should they be otherwise?

This vision is not a Christian one : it is much closer to attitudes one finds in Eastern philosophies (though I do not think the author has been directly influenced by Hindu or Chinese thought). After the tsunami disaster two years ago various representatives of the Christian Churches and other world religions came forward to make comments about it and the troublesome theological problems involved. They made pretty heavy weather of the issue to say the least. But there was one exception. A Hindu wrote a letter to *The Times* to say that in his religion mankind does not have a special place in the universe and so there is nothing inherently shocking about earthquakes and other natural disasters : evils they undoubtedly are from a human point of view but they are part of the overall scheme of things, a scheme which does not have favourites. ■

THERE ARE few genuine Nature poets, or for that matter painters : even the Romantics who rediscovered Nature and made her acceptable in polite company, wrote about man's confrontation with Nature, the interplay of the human and the natural, rather than about Nature herself. Wordsworth's most famous poem is not so much about daffodils as about what the remembered vision of daffodils did for him "in lonely and in pensive mood". And eighteenth century poets viewed Nature through the distorting prism of classical mythology — peopled hills and streams with beings in whose existence they did not, in the last resort, believe.

In contrast to all this there is in Sylvia Oldroyd's nature poetry, as in John Clare's, complete acceptance of the natural world as it is, unidealized and unmediated by classical models. It is the poetry of someone who not only inhabits the country but who is, if you like, 'supposed to be there' even if he or she is not actually tilling the soil. It is the not the poetry of someone who goes to the country from the town for recreation or exaltation — and I say this without at all meaning to disparage the latter person. There is nothing wrong in going to wild places for inspiration, quite the contrary, and sometimes town people see things that country people utterly miss. But this is not the feeling here. The poet is not out in the woods in order to write a poem or to get an idea, nor is Nature a goddess, a path towards something else — Nature is as she is, with all her moods,

"I trace a melancholy moulding
In the forest face
And revel in such desolation"

Who else has quite put it like this? ■

THE TYPICAL 'I' of Sylvia Oldroyd's poems is not a traveller or painter, not even a devotee of Nature but simply someone who interacts with Nature in an appreciative but entirely undemonstrative way, sometimes regretting their very presence :

“Cracking of shards, we leave
Angled wounds...
On Flash Pond ...”

And the wanderer or wanderers of these poems remain anonymous, their specific identities in the here and now are not considered to be worth mentioning, they are just “We three on the bridge”. ■

WORDSWORTH, in his magnificent *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* wrote that “Heaven lies about us in our infancy” and claimed that the child was closer to the origins of life than the mature person. But Sylvia Oldroyd’s poetry is the poetry of the mature person, someone who has lived and thought and above all *remembers* more.

“*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting*”

Wordsworth wrote. But the sense here is more

“*This life is not a sleep but a remembering*”.

By this I do not only mean that the older person, being less outgoing, has more time for reflection, nor even that the older person actually remembers his or her earlier years better —

“Wind tosses time away
and I taste again
those ecstatic first sea-sights”
(“Tides”)

though the phenomenon is well attested.

No. Apart from all this, the older person remembers more because he or she is more in the ‘stream of life’, has acquired a sense of one’s continuity with all living (and even non-living) things, a sense of immortality that is almost physical and has nothing to do with heaven or the beyond.

There is thus a certain balm in the aging process : the past is more present to me now than it ever was but not at all in the sense of longing for past youth — one notes the complete absence of nostalgia in Sylvia Oldroyd. The living past is felt more deeply, more strongly as one gets older, not a dead-and-gone but an *active* past which is perpetuating itself within the living. Thus, in the remarkable poem *Spectrum* the poet’s mother perpetuates herself within her daughter (the writer) as she inadvertently takes on certain mannerisms

“I see you in the pull of jacket

Across shoulders, the placing
of feet. After dark I leave curtains
undrawn, to watch your hands

pouring tea, plumping a cushion,
smoothing back my hair.
I am ripening into you.”

I was at once reminded of a similar passage in Proust, the writer who more than all others was preoccupied with the passage of time, where Marcel's grandmother perpetuates herself in much the same way. There is also the striking poem by Thomas Hardy, *Heredity*, a poet who has much in common with Sylvia Oldroyd though his vision is much more pessimistic —

“I am the family face
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion” . ■

THIS sense of self-perpetuating cycles applies not only to the natural world in the usual sense but to the human/mechanical world as well since, in Sylvia Oldroyd's eyes, the latter does not differ in essence from the former. Thus, in another moving poem, the author hesitates to wash her mother's bedspread, desperately clinging on to a remnant of the past

“Reluctantly I feed it in,
my comforter; and watch
the drum revolving
into life.”

Death does not have the same significance for Sylvia Oldroyd as it has for most of us since it lacks finality. In one of the most original and striking of her poems she articulates the peculiar sentiment that I have myself often felt at funerals, a sort of anti-mourning which is not disrespectful to the deceased, quite the reverse

“and I know a strange envy
of his freedom from mortality;
somewhere, or nowhere
his eternity begins.
I have my dying still to do.”

Such sentiments, of course, are senseless and vaguely heretical in a society for whom this present life is the be all and end all, and which insists on turning its back on death, pretending it does not exist. But death is there lurking round the corner for all that and we know it.

At the same time it is heartening to see the author avoiding the sort of glib promises of heaven dispensed at funerals by the officiating priest. Thus the pleasing ambivalence of “somewhere, or nowhere” — in the last resort there is, perhaps, not such a great difference between the two. ■

INTERESTINGLY, we have here a more positive aspect to the biological outlook which is currently being trumpeted about by loudmouths like Richard Dawkins. Maybe the DNA has a certain consciousness attached to it and retains distant memories which extend beyond the individual life : some people today believe

this. But one does not have to commit oneself to such a theory not yet officially authorised by science. I believe it is not only possible to tap into racial or species memories but that this happens to some extent all the time, naturally : “no man is an island” but participates in the stream of life, all life. ■

WORDSWORTH, at any rate in *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, looks beyond and behind Nature to ‘Heaven’ and another world, while Housman insists on making Nature responsible for his own chronic melancholy — which one feels has a human, rather than ‘natural’, origin (and doubtless, given the time, had much to do with his sexual orientation). There is none of this in John Clare or Sylvia Oldroyd. They are meticulous observers who take Nature as she is. And in a sense they are right. One may legitimately rise up in arms against a particular government or rail against ‘fate’ but one does not rebel against nature — the very idea is ludicrous. ■

SENSE OF the pantheistic continuity of life and not only life but the consciousness that accompanies life. Because of this ‘death’ has a quite different sense in Sylvia Oldroyd’s poetry. Rather there is the sense of a self-perpetuating cycle of the seasons —

“let remembrance ebb
and flow like meadow grass
that falls to your rip-hook
every summer’s end;
and in its due time
comes into green again.” ■

THERE IS time in the sense of duration and time in the sense of succession. The latter is human time, one year follows another, fashions which come and go, governments change. Duration is something quite different and contemporary man, mired in the present and obsessed with youth, has lost all sense of it. Sylvia Oldroyd thinks and feels in big, long stretches of time, aeons not months or centuries. This is scientific time, geological time, the sinking into the strata of the earth, becoming mud and slate as in the poem with the latter title. ■

MACROCOSM/MICROCOSM underlying unity of all things. ■

UNIMPORTANCE of man(kind), there are no Napoleons or Isaac Newtons in this world and the two composers mentioned by name, Chopin and Debussy, are precisely composers who specialized in deceptively slight works, who turned their backs on romantic grandeur and tragedy. ■

BEFORE BELONGING to the human species, we belong to the animal kingdom and before that to the universe which is, as far as we know, almost entirely inanimate. It is because Sylvia Oldroyd has this sense of ‘belonging’, not in any twee New Age sense, but in a very real, lived sense that the stars and outer space are not menacing or even especially remote — compare this with Pascal’s famous line “*The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me*”. The infinitely distant stars “anoint our eyelids” in one poem and the coming of the millennium is “only a moment of man’s measuring”. Sylvia Oldroyd even dares to contemplate without apprehension what was before and beyond the Big Bang and the creation itself —

“night is shedding
universes as we enter

the Grand Silence” ■

Sebastian Hayes 15/7/08