
For more than forty years, Carcanet has quietly built its reputation as the leading publisher of contemporary British poetry in the Modernist tradition. Since its transformation from a magazine to a press under the directorship of Michael Schmidt, Carcanet’s editorial vision has consistently joined poetic inheritance and innovation, resisting the whims of postmodernism as well as the profit-driven demons of other publishing houses. Clive Wilmer (b. 1945) has been a Carcanet mainstay from the beginning, publishing his first book in 1977 followed by five subsequent volumes. *New and Selected Poems* is the author’s own selection of the best of his previous work, together with an impressive array of translations, mostly from the Hungarian but also Latin, Italian, Portuguese, German, Polish, Bulgarian, and Russian. His linguistic dexterity is on display throughout the volume, more than three quarters of which consists of his original poetry. Wilmer, a fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, belongs to a particular line of British Modernism that is coolly rational and formalist; he compares favorably with Donald Davie and C. H. Sisson, as well as with his contemporary Neil Powell, Carcanet poets all.

A central characteristic of Wilmer’s work, one which he shares with Davie and Sisson—and, of course, with readers of this journal—is his interest in religion: “I brood on God, / The distant prospect of his love, and bend / Aesthetics and poetics to that end” (“Two Journals” 102). Here, characteristic of Wilmer’s sensitivity to form and meaning, the enjambed line reinforces the image of art bent toward a spiritual aim while the rhyme signifies a unity of poetry and faith. A semantic playfulness also typifies Wilmer’s voice, for instance in “The Parable of the Sower,” which describes a William Morris window in an ancient church. The blend of modern and medieval, of agnostic artist and biblical subject, meet in the concluding lines, where the sower’s ground and the artist’s glass alike “Are stained through with devotion, with his need / For things to mean—the word / Secreted in the seed” (58). The poet here suggests the Incarnational impulse active in the vision of the craftsman, whose creating “word” in glass functions as spiritual seed sown into devotion and as Word made flesh.

Religion, then, is clearly central in Wilmer’s poetic consciousness, and his poems positively teem with the rhetoric and symbols of Christianity, for instance the creating Word (“In the Beginning” 180), the Eucharist (“Homecoming” 50; “Ghostliness” 189), the Nativity and Crucifixion (“Stigmata”
195–196), and the Resurrection (“East Anglian Churchyard” 8). Here is a poet who has listened carefully to the silence of God, “the old perspective into endless dark / with silence at the source” (“The Well” 14), and uncovered a deep spirituality. “The Ruined Abbey,” with its echoes of Eliot’s “East Coker,” meditates on silence and the survival of faith, despite the emptiness of modernity, the ravages of time, and the evil of humanity:

In ruin, the form remains;
When the form falls, there is stone;
Stone crumbled, there is still
The dust, dust . . . and a silence
The centuries bow to—a silence
Lapped by the speechless howl of winds. (12)

Here, God’s silence, embodied in the typographical caesurae, is eloquent proof of Himself. Indeed, for Wilmer silence prepares the way for the Word, for language is an impediment to spiritual perception. In “Near Walsingham,” the foolish myths and legends constructed about this holy site have cloaked the reality of God; yet the immanent story that outstrips all others, “The interminable / Tale given and not made” (49), is the Word itself. Thus, Wilmer surmises, the more we speak of God the further we are from Him.

Interlaced through the Christian ethos of Wilmer’s poetry is a surprising but unmistakable Buddhist perspective. “At a Friend’s Funeral” begins with an echo of the Psalms: “Spare me, Lord, for my days are nothing.” Yet this invocation leads not to Christian assurance of an eternal reward but rather, to a Buddhist sense of soul transmigration: “My friend, though, who is not here as I am, / Is everywhere and in all things. / . . . / These voices woven in polyphony / Unwoven into silence” (153). Even more visibly, the third section of “Stigmata,” a poem based on the five wounds of Christ, draws Buddhism and Christianity together into spiritual synergy:

A Buddha’s sleek tranquillity reflects
In a glazed wood veneer. Nearby is hung
An austere body on a crucifix,
Broken with pain, though sinuously young. (191)

Wilmer has stated that his religious convictions have not been consistent through his life, preferring to define himself broadly as Christian but not