



BOOK REVIEWS

MIRIAM WADDINGTON: COLLECTED WORKS

Oxford University Press, 1986.

Gail Vanstone

When Miriam Waddington writes poetry, she constructs kaleidoscopes of light and magic. Sometimes her poems are plain, sometimes whimsical, mildly ribald, riotously funny, often wise. They are symphonies of trees, shells, spaces of green, showers of snow, spiralling dances, perfumed ceremonies lustrous as gems, happy companions for a Chagall canvas. But more than that, they constitute a singular feminine statement of the world and its workings.

When Oxford University Press released *Miriam Waddington: Collected Works* in the summer of 1986, it brought together for the first time this rich fabric of poems written over the course of fifty years. The 422-page edition compiles eleven volumes of verse in chronological order and includes a section of previously uncollected poems. The title defines its dual aspect: the woman's story etched through her works of art. For the thread that unifies the whole is the voice of the poet, the woman who stubbornly insists on saying things in her own way.

During the fifties, stung by critics who implied that she was not very brainy or metaphysical and that her interests were merely emotional and domestic, Waddington set out to prove that she was just as "brainy, metaphysical and undomestic as anyone." Fortunately for us, she quickly discovered that it is in the domestic and personal that her poetry is grounded. This insistence on the poetic value of emotional experience and biography is precisely the strength of her work.

Challenging her critics, Waddington deals squarely with emotion, revealing herself a woman of passion — passion, one notes, informed by integrity, wit and rare wisdom. She writes with candour and

freshness that charges her poetry with poignancy and authority. Many a poetic observation is mediated by a glimmer of humour. The point, however, is clear. The poet *will* have her word, though, ruefully, she knows not without price:

*And that old termagant, my
tongue, is queen of nothing
now; has lately split, run off,
and begun to play it safe.*

— "Husbands"

Arguably, this insistence on style and voice establishes an underlying theme: the value and necessity of the woman's voice.

In this manner, *Collected Works* recounts the poet's tale, the story of the Manitoba daughter of Russian-Jewish parents, the professional artist with two full-time careers — social worker and university professor — the friend, lover, wife, mother, single parent, widow, the Canadian twentieth century woman, scrutinizer of the human condition.

The Afterword offers a glimpse into the private space behind the poetry. Here Waddington discloses her poetic credo, her belief in the necessary fusion of poet and poem. The poem, she says, lives "an organic thing with roots not only in the thoughts and feelings of the poet, but in her/his actual experience... its rhythm, tone, voice and the very breath of the poet inseparable."

From the beginning, Waddington decreed that her language would be transparent and simple so that it might say something that others would recognize. Transparent and simple it has remained, profound in its simplicity:

*I watched your
receding figure
grow smaller and in my
dreams I stood on
the road for a long
time watching the
snow fall and waiting
for your return.*

— "Dreaming of Mister Never"

As a child, Waddington discovered her love of words and delight in their inex-

haustible possibilities. Her early poems abound with natural images: the symbolic colour green, the sense of soaring space that would become identifying characteristics of her work. Even in this early period she demonstrated the ability to transform the everyday, to transport it into a poetic landscape, infusing the ordinary — or the perceptibly ordinary — with a transcending poetry. The poet often constructs her verse around images of nature, situating herself in their centre at one with the world:

*When I step out and feel the green
world*

*Its concave walls must cup my
summer coming*

And curving, hold me

*Beyond all geography in a transparent
sphere*

*Move and distend as rainbows in a
mirror*

— "Green World"

The poetry in her early volumes traces the life of a young woman, exploring themes of remembered childhood, love, reflections on her Jewish heritage and Canadian situation. It was during this period that Waddington would reveal a rigorous social conscience, tempered, in part, by her social work experiences. This concern for the well-being of humanity is manifest as the poet tackles the global problems of injustice, prejudice, the nuclear threat. Remembering the bitter race riots of the sixties, Waddington reaches across the barriers and calls for peace:

*brother brother my
black one in the red
in the broken fire
of my heart in the
bleak black middle
of this ragged century
the present and possibly
oh possibly the
praised pleasant
sunhung greenglimmer-
ing future*

— "Selma"

As a maturing poet, Waddington displayed a sophisticated and intimate rela-

tionship with language, demonstrating with considerable finesse its ability to translate visual experiences and emotional landscapes into words. Key in this endeavour is the poet's invention with space, an obvious fascination. Her mastery here is breathtaking in its power of evocation. She may fly through it, returned from the dead on an electric crane (*Circus Stuff*), paint memory portraits with it (*Absent Space*), speed back and forth in time (*Dreaming of Mister Never*), or study its properties of definition (*The Little Fringes*). Space is the medium she employs to probe life's mysteries, to express her longings, to extol the world's marvels. Witness the joy of the "disguised fairy godmother" lamenting a youth twenty years gone:

*just watch me —
I'm about to turn
a million glittering
cartwheels in milky
outer skies and I'm
rolling all the way
up to eternity and
I'm singing*

— "Old Age Blues"

Waddington's love poetry, perhaps her

strongest exposition of feminine strength and self-determination, provides some of the best examples of her unique 'translation.' Unabashed delight in sensual pleasures, the pain of unrequited love, and naked longings for departed love are subjects probed with insight and utter lack of pretension. Haunting echoes and remembered images from other works stalk these poems, imparting a spangled texture and depth intensified by the vibrancy of personal experience. These are the poems that disclose the woman with their dizzying sense of passion and underlying current of force. With pure beauty of image and sound the poet celebrates her lover:

*greenman beautiful
moving across
human words
into spaced wides
of light
measured through
forests of people
in miles
of branchy veins
calculated
by tallnesses
of air
greenmanbeautiful*

*beautiful
beyond the light of western rivers
torrential*

*freedom towering burst
of the world's spring
(moving wound
in my side) deepness of
grass riverdarkness*

wakening

— "Dream Telescope"

In her most recent works a sombre air prevails as the poet considers of dictates of old age and the inevitability of death in an ever-darkening world. However, her love of life surfaces — personified by the "serious apprentice" (*The Magician*) who asked to learn to fly over rooftops. The joyous spirit of the indomitable woman commands:

*Now lay aside your grief
and wake the sleepy world,
old child, infant lady —
its yawn is purest gold.*

— "Wake-up Song"

Miriam Waddington Collected Works is a book about truth, a story of joy and pain, a marvellous gift to us, the poet's kaleidoscope extended.

HOLDING THE POSE

Sharon Thesen. Toronto: The Coach House Press.

SECOND NATURE

Libby Scheier. Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1986.

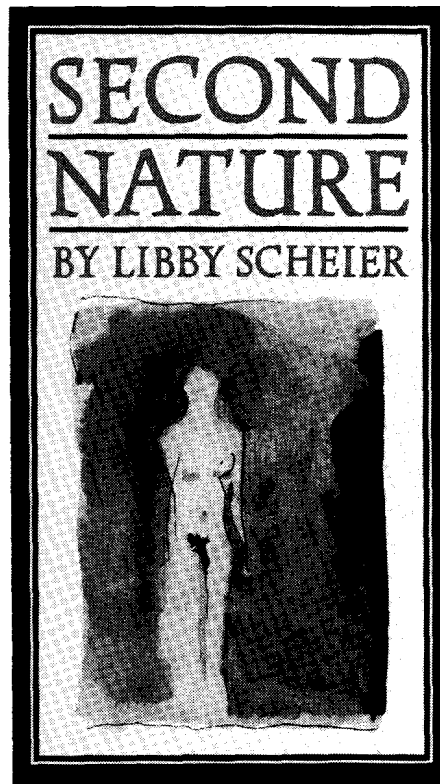
Gail Fox

Both Libby Scheier and Sharon Thesen are gifted poets. Having read neither of their first books, I was shaken and delighted by Thesen's *Holding the Pose* and Scheier's *Second Nature*. What is so good about both of these poets is not only their keen perception of women dealing with men and vice versa but their use of language which far transcends the usual feminist writing in today's poetry.

In Thesen's poem, "Before Choice":

*Eliot's wasteland
a busy, elegant stagecraft
where bumblebees cruise fatly
around the burning rhododendrons*

or "accordions of moonlit mountains" from "Season of No Bungling" the humour, intensity, and clarity of her imagery bring to mind all the private times I have had with men in which something always eludes me. (Is it my fault or theirs?) Thesen, however, makes such meetings



clearer. She is mainly concerned with the human scene and sums it up nicely:

*there is no sunset only twilight
all the romance indoors
all the scenery human.*

To Thesen's new book I owe a debt of gratitude. Not only is it exciting reading,

but it acquaints me somewhat more with "post-modern" poetry and its approach to man and nature.

Whereas Thesen focuses almost only on intimate relationships, Scheier also writes of childhood in McCarthy's America. The last thing, however, that Scheier's poetry is is "a political tract" (from a "Poem About Rape"). Her methods of shaping such events as rape can be summed up in the lines:

*Today the elephants are predominant
they prance in casual fashion over
hearts turning to stone.*

(Elephants, I)

Or her description of nature (Woman-kind) in "Five Meditations on Jungles":

*Jungles have intense light
and intense darkness where beauty
can exist in total secrecy
unspoiled by versifiers and image-
makers.*

This is how it was intended to be.

For what's dark to remain dark.

For what's light to dazzle.

Scheier's tone is angry, savage, then easy, colloquial. "It's great to be four years old and a cowboy." One of her best poems, I feel, is "Ethiopia" where one finds such lines as

*and hundreds of boney children, their
skin wrapped around their joints like
Hitler's lampshades.*

And I especially respond to the ending of