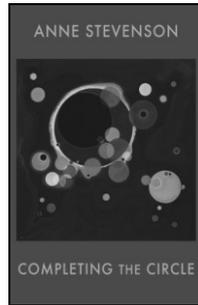


COMPLETING THE CIRCLE
DILYS WOOD ON ANNE STEVENSON (1933-2020)



“What epithets would describe the range of tone in these poems?— laid-back; rueful; tolerant; forgiving; self-mocking; assured but not uppish; profoundly regretful but not maudlin?”

photo © Anne Lennox

Given the focus in this issue in writing when older, it was serendipitous to be sent for review **Anne Stevenson’s** *Completing the Circle*. This American poet who has spent the greater part of her life in England died this year in her mid-eighties. This book (the latest of more than twenty Stevenson poetry collections) is a magical, slightly dishevelled gathering of short and long poems, in which this poet’s great technical skill competes with her outstanding honesty and humanity.

The poet’s portrait on the back cover has a decidedly ‘elfish’ look. ‘Elfish’ is defined in the Shorter OED as ‘weird, spectral; tricky, mischievous; intractable’, connotations that apply to this collection.

‘Spectral’ certainly plays a part. Quite a few poems are either dedicated to dead friends or about relationships in the poet’s early life or about the spirit of the artist living on after death in her/his works. Other poems employ sustained metaphors of change and decay, as the beautiful opening of *Winter Idyll from My Back Window*, “Naked and equal in their winter sleep, / poplars, ashes, maples, beeches sweep / a bruised agitated sky with skeletons. / Not a leaf. Not a leaf. Lovely generations / are shrivelling to mulch and mulchiness / under highway flyovers and underpasses.”

Reading this book made me want to write a poem myself. I take this to be a useful indication of the technical skill of the poet. My reaction often seems to relate to sound and rhythm, also to the use of formal forms or rhyme or both. The first poem in the book is a sonnet, *Anaesthesia*, using two rhymes only: “They slip away who never said goodbye, / My vintage friends so long depended on / To warm deep levels of my memory. / And if I cared for them, care has to learn / How to grieve sparingly and not to cry. / Age is an exercise in unconcern”.

The poem *How Poems Arrive* is in another formal form, *terza rima*. This poem is the distillation of a theme that Stevenson often returns to in poetry and prose: what is an authentic poem? Stevenson makes subtle points here, while demonstrating technical skill in her formal rhyme scheme: “You say them as your undertongue declares, / Then let them knock about your upper mind / Until the shape of what they mean appears. // Like love, they’re strongest when admitted blind, / Judging by feel, feeling with sharpened sense / While yet their need to be is undefined.”

An Old Poet’s View from the Departure Platform is an aggressive attack on bad poetry. This theme is also handled using rhyme, which serves to sharpen witty sallies: “Professional poems in incomprehensible argot / Unsettle me more and more / Words about words about words to pamper the ego / Of some theoretical bore.” Stevenson is inclined to stir things and has forthright views.

Many aspects of skill may be studied here – language, choosing the right form, versification, subtle and witty rhyme. In her Preface – marvellous to have a preface by the poet! – Stevenson refers to ‘tone’: ‘I like to think this collection is consistent in maintaining a tone that is serious without being funereal, acquiescent without indulging in confessional despair. In many ways, what we call tone is

the most difficult element of poetry to establish without giving way either to imitation or forced originality.'

Reading these thoughts of a master theorist, one wants to add the school-masterly instruction 'Discuss', and get different views on the under-discussed subject of tone. As I see it, 'getting the tone right' is a discipline that requires a lot of practice – and it's not less difficult to prevent our poems being 'all tone and no substance'. In the collections poets publish later in life a quiet tone is often the distinguishing feature. What epithets would best describe the range of tone in these poems?– laid-back; rueful; tolerant; forgiving; self-mocking; assured but not uppish; profoundly regretful but not maudlin?

There is nothing new about subtlety of tone in Stevenson's work. Tone is just one aspect of the rational, judicious persona – not over-heated emotionally, not political rampant (though deeply concerned) – that she tends to present in her poems. Passion 'recollected in tranquillity' naturally appears in the work of a (poetically) temperate older poet: in the short elegiac poem, *As the Past Passes* ("Dead passion, like pain, is only a name, / word never to be made flesh again, / never again desire's uncontrollable purge / of the censoring brain"); and in the lengthy highly amusing *Now We Are 80*, which traces the poet's friendship with the New Zealand poet Fleur Adcock ("In flight from marriage, never out of love, / ... / We were two anxious, undercover flirts").

Whether we call it 'tone' or something more profound – 'philosophy' perhaps – there is often great weight in Stevenson's words. In *Anaesthesia*, we have "There's a white indemnity / That with the first frost tamps the garden down. / There's nothing we can do but let it be"; in *Poppy Day*, the November cold inspires a metaphor, "Stand in the chill of the present and close your eyes. / Unspeakable, the colours of yesterday / Fade into level grey – like language, like memory"; in *A Dream of Guilt*, remembering her mother, she writes "Your kind restraint, like stolen money, / weighs on me. I can't forget. I can't forget"; in *The Bully Thrush*, a highly attractive, quite lightly handled, meditation on bird-song weight comes towards the end of the poem, "I feel an old story pulling itself up from under, / lending its meaning to codes in a mystery play."

In the main, the subjects of these poems are 'eternal'. The collection is nevertheless slightly untidy, on the lines that 'everything must be packed in' including poems outside her normal poetic focus. Stevenson is aware of this potential criticism, referring in her Preface to a 'gallimaufry' and to the inclusion of long narratives as an 'anomaly'.

The poems here about Stevenson's own or the generic past in the mid-C20 fall into two categories: more or less deep reflection on time past and, alternatively, a more detailed record of social relationships including the race issue in America. The latter are interesting and well-done but could have been expressed in prose. Two poems, Stevenson tells us, have been in and out of prose form.

Where there is perhaps declining energy and lesser output of the richest work, there is often the temptation to 'pad out' a book. These tendencies to dilute books do not always matter. With a richly endowed poet like Stevenson, there is much of interest in the less profound work. This includes in this case some fascinating insights into Stevenson's foot in two worlds, the US and the UK.

The picture of Americans in the UK can be a source of a rich, teasing humour. A lovely informality is achieved in some of the poems. *Sandi Russell Sings*, for example, includes a tongue-in-cheek, robust attack on the British weather that made me laugh out loud: "The darkness, the wetness, the wrongness / of this English winter – / unwelcome as daybreak's midnight. / Yesterday's downpour / is predicting tomorrow's rain. // O friend and forever American, / what are we doing here, cramped on the island? / How did we fumblingly find our way / to this teapot of terrible weather?"

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