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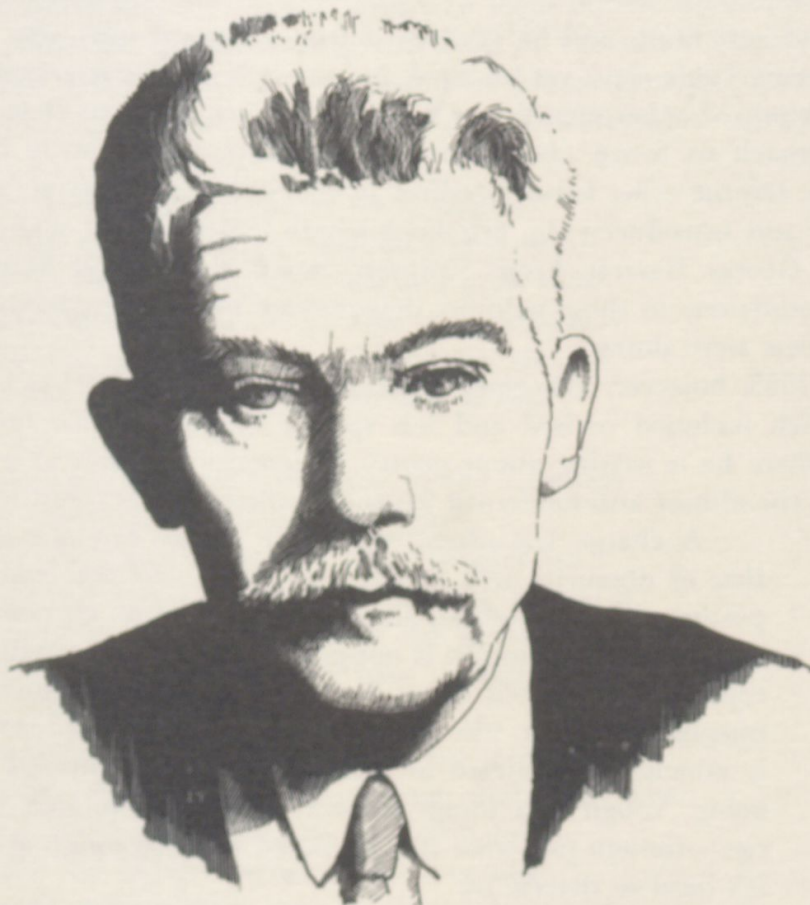
The Hollins Critic

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Letting The Darkness In: The Poetic Achievement of John Hall Wheelock



I

The career of John Hall Wheelock abounds with contradictions; the tensions between his prose criticism and his poetry, his employment as an editor and his life's work as a poet, his romantic temperament and this ironic age, have at the same time produced in his poetry its most persistent weaknesses and its most permanent achievements. The year of his birth, 1886, falls between those

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of Pound and Eliot, and he graduated from Harvard only two years ahead of Eliot's remarkable class; yet his work has never been characterized by Pound's or Eliot's kinds of experimentation. Even now, his style seems dated at times, and his approach to broad abstractions is most unmodernistically direct and free of irony. On the other hand, as editor of the Scribner's Poets of Today series, he selected and introduced the first book-length collections of such poets as James Dickey, George Garrett, Louis Simpson, David Slavitt, and May Swenson, and his introductions to those volumes demonstrate his clear understanding of what those poets were doing.

In 1963, however, Wheelock published *What Is Poetry?*, a collection of essays which included revised and less specific versions of his introductions; in these, where he is writing about poetry in general, he gives us a closer look at some of the almost anti-modernist attitudes which have shaped his poetry:

A charge less often, and more justly, brought than that of obscurity will be the complaint that the contemporary poem is cerebral, accomplished, erudite, and empty of feeling . . . Emotion is not permitted to get through except in disguise, wit being the mask most favored for this purpose. Our age, like the Augustan age of Queen Anne, is ashamed and afraid of emotion. A poet is praised for being "tough"—"a tough thinker," "a tough-minded lyricist"—though just what he's supposed to be so tough about it's hard to determine.

Merely from the tone of this passage, the reader skilled in wit and irony will deduce that Wheelock's poems will be too romantic and old-fashioned; and, for a prolific period longer than many poets' working lifetimes, they were. Between 1905 and 1936 he published eight books, only the first of which was proverbially slim; this immense body of work contains less than a dozen of the poems responsible for his present reputation, which was earned by the work he did after *Poems 1911-1936*. During the twenty years between that book and the first of the four books he has published since, he seems to have honed the in-

strument which makes his later work capable of speaking gravely, gracefully, in a dateless style, of what Faulkner called "the old verities and truths of the heart." It is worth remarking, in a spirit of gratitude, that a poet could survive so many years and so many mediocre poems, and come to write, in his seventies and eighties, work which constitutes one of the signal achievements in American literature.

II

By Daylight and In Dream includes poems from all of Wheelock's earlier books, as well as twelve new poems completed since the publication of *Dear Men and Women* (1966); the collection provides some answers to questions arising from the contradictions I have mentioned.

Though most of the poems published before 1936 suffer from nineteenth-century stylistic influences and from a failure to focus on the unique aspects of an experience, there are foreshadowings in them of the voice Wheelock mastered in his later years. Some of these qualities are evident in "Lancelot to Guinevere," which was first collected in *The Beloved Adventure* (1912):

Now all the east is tired of the twilight,
And the world's borders blossom like a rose,
And the world's tapers tremble and grow dim;
Under the cloud-line, under the gray twilight,
Under the pale, cold arch of heaven's rim,
The low, white fire of the morning glows,

And a clear wind is wandering in the meadows—
O queenly heart, never again, again,
Shall this thing be, or this sweet wonder be!
I take my way through the unending meadows,
Through the long fields beside the sunless sea
I take my way, I pass from your domain.

The spirit's fire, more fiery than the morning,
The inner flame, followed through night and day,
Burns to a purer light the old blind love;
Under the infinite arches of the morning
I move with a new gladness—high above,
The last stars fade, and I am far away.

I have found one thing more fair than the old heaven,
More sweet than all sad things to think upon—
Yes, and more sweet than your two folded hands.
Sleep, and forget; the opening gates of heaven
Flood with a sudden pain the empty lands,
And the old wonder wakes—but I am gone.

John Hall Wheelock

John Hall Wheelock was born in 1886 in Far Rockaway, Long Island. After receiving his A.B. degree from Harvard in 1908, he attended the universities of Goettingen and Berlin. In 1911 he began his career at Charles Scribner's Sons, and he served there in a variety of capacities, as editor, senior editor, director, secretary, and treasurer, until his retirement in 1957.

Among the numerous awards which Mr. Wheelock has received are those of the New England Poetry Society (1937) and the Signet Society (1965), the Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award (1956), the Borestone Mountain Poetry Award (1957), and the Bollingen Prize (1962). He is a member of the Poetry Society of America and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and he has held offices in both organizations. Since 1947 he has served as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Mr. Wheelock lives in New York City.

—LD

The romantic excesses of language and imagery which mar this poem are evident and plentiful enough; but even where the words are uninteresting, the artfully varied meter contributes to the effectiveness of the poem's movement. The third line of the final stanza, for instance, is not very interesting in itself; but in the context of the whole stanza, it makes a humanizing descent from "the old heaven" to more earthly and private matters. The progress from the middle to the end of the stanza is similar, though in the last line it is right verbal texture, rather than imagery, which closes the movement.

None of this does much to rescue the poem, for if the poem's movement is more arresting than its language or imagery, it is still too easily predictable. But whereas a poem like "Trees" is almost mathematically predictable, the movement of this poem, because of the metrical variations, is foreseen more in the way one perceives an intricate physical action, like a school figure on ice skates, or a discus throw: the continued flow of the movement arouses suspense, so that its graceful conclusion gives pleasure.

This ability to enliven the texture even of mediocre language seems to have marked Wheelock's poetry from the beginning, and may have helped blind him to his language's ineffectiveness, so that it was not until the middle 1930's that he began to simplify and strengthen his diction, as in "Silence," first collected in *Poems 1911-1936*:

There is a mystery too deep for words;
The silence of the dead comes nearer to it,
Being wisest in the end. What word shall hold
The sorrow sitting at the heart of things,
The majesty and patience of the truth!
Silence will serve; it is an older tongue:
The empty room, the moonlight on the wall,
Speak for the unreturning traveller.

Later on, in *The Gardener* (1961), Wheelock's language becomes supple enough to accommodate two voices, as in "Mr. X (——— State Hospital)":

He dreamt he was sleeping, he said, and when he awoke
Found he still was. Then he got all excited,
And had to tell it again—how, for a moment,
He could remember the future, and everything
Turned sad, like music: the timid sound mice
Made on the attic floor, moonlight,
The smile upon her borrowed face.

These poems show more confidence than is evident in the earlier work; and they even exemplify the toughness Wheelock has derided: these poems stand up to greater forces than those which often collapsed the earlier ones.

The poems in this book, then, seem to have been chosen not only on the basis of quality, but also in order to give a clear picture of the poet's development, to compose a kind of poetic autobiography. (It should be noted, however, that from any given period, Wheelock has chosen his best: of the nearly 260 poems in *Poems 1911-1936*, which was itself a selection, he has retained here only ninety-one.) In recording the whole career, *By Daylight and In Dream* also records what Winfield Townley Scott, writing of *Dear Men and Women*, called a rare triumph:

John Hall Wheelock has published his best book of poems. As a practitioner in the field, I cannot think of any success so enviable and, as a common reader, of any that should make his readers feel quite so warm and happy. For of course the triumphs of such older poets are rare [Wheelock published *Dear Men and Women* on his eightieth birthday]. But they happen . . . and make younger poetry, no matter how ecstatic or brilliant or beautiful, certainly seem less.

III

The eight sections of *By Daylight and In Dream* are arranged chronologically except for the first section, which contains the twelve new poems, and the sixth, "Scherzo," a group of lighter poems selected from the whole body of work. Before 1936, Wheelock's poems, besides being vague and derivative in language, were somewhat limited by the single-mindedness with which Wheelock made direct attacks on broad abstractions. In Section II, for example, most of the poems are repetitive struggles with the mysteries of love unattained; but the young poet rendered his situation in vague terms, and so was unable to lift his poems out of ordinary realms. In the third section, he emerges from himself and broadens his scope to include observations of the world about him; and in the fourth, lost love and the daily world conspire to produce poems of dejection, such as "In the Dark City," first collected in *The Black Panther*:

There is a harper plays
Through the long watches of the lonely night

When, like a cemetery,
 Sleeps the dark city, with her millions lying
 each in his tomb.
 I feel it in my dream, but when I wake—
 Suddenly, like some secret thing not to be overheard,
 It ceases,
 And the gray night grows dumb. Only in memory
 Linger those veiled adagios, fading, fading . . .
 Till, with the morning, they are lost.

What door was opened then?
 What worlds, undreamed of, lie around us in
 our sleep,
 That yet we may not know?
 Where is it one sat playing,
 Over and over, with such high and dreadful peace,
 The passion and sorrow of the eternal doom?

Wheelock asks old questions which poets have always asked, because the answers are elusive; but here the statement is too direct, and leaves no room for the reverberations of the mystery. However, the persistence of these questions, and a continuing failure to confront them profitably, at last led Wheelock to cast a wider net, in long meditative poems which have increased in flexibility and power as he has grown older. Most often, these poems begin with dreams, or with associations aroused by the house Wheelock's father built in East Hampton, Long Island, where the poet has spent some part of every summer for the past eighty years. The technique of these meditations is foreshadowed in "The Divine Fantasy," which was first collected in *The Black Panther* (1922) and then, revised, in *Dear Men and Women* (1966); in the present collection, it appears in section IV, in still further revised form:

 . . . the hunted mouse
 Timidly hurries through the lane, his eye
 Turned up in terror as the owl goes by:
 On softest feathers of silence overhead
 Flits the dim shadow of the ancient dread,
 Hooded and huge, the cruelty of his beak
 Bent on old lustful mysteries. A squeak!
 A scuffle! Beating of wings—and in the lane,
 Silence! and the old wrong is done again,
 That was before Adam—the triumphant heart
 And the defeated, each one doomed to his part,
 They play it through, the old tragedy, where one
 Presence still wars and is warred upon,
 Slays and is slain . . .

 . . . on dark shores
 Beats the insistent passion, that implores

The one dear breast of pity or disdain,
 To be reborn, to be reborn again . . .
 . . . Forever flows
 The dreadful drama to its stately close
 And endless ending, the fierce carnival
 Of death and passion, wherein each and all
 Mix, and are mingled, slaughter, blend, and pass
 Each into the other—the high poem that has
 No end and no beginning, which the one
 Self in all living forms beneath the sun,
 And on all worlds around it and above,
 Weaves on the strands of hunger, death, and love.

The whole poem exhibits the controlled movement of these passages, though the language is still marred by the difficulties I have mentioned; and the development of the theme is hampered by what Helene Mullins, in a review of *The Bright Doom* (1927), called "a too-overwhelming desire to compress the whole of the universe into one poem. This is something that he tries again and again to accomplish, until one can imagine his becoming, at last, impatient of the limitations of words and utterly silenced by the unreasonableness of his own ambition."

Something of this sort may have happened, for after *Poems 1911-1936* it was twenty years before another of Wheelock's books appeared. During this period, however, Wheelock was far from inactive; he had become an editor at Scribner's in 1926, and from 1932 until his retirement in 1957 his responsibilities were considerable—treasurer, secretary, director, senior editor—and, in 1940, he at last married the woman to whom many of his earliest love-lyrics had been addressed.

A study of this period in Wheelock's life could doubtless demonstrate that the editor's increasing involvement with contemporary literature helped the poet to shed some of his stylistic mannerisms; Wheelock was closely involved with such authors as Thomas Wolfe and Scott Fitzgerald, as well as with nearly every poet Scribner's published. In any case, the rhythmic control of "The Divine Fantasy" was sharpened during the relatively silent years; and in the years since, Wheelock has made the long meditation his most versatile mode of writing. In it, he is able to venture on time-worn themes, in language which has previously had its uses, and can still bring renewed faith and understanding to himself and to his readers.

IV

"Scherzo," the section of this book which contains the lighter poems, precedes the two sections made up of recent work, and so serves as a kind of intermission, emphasizing the reduction of activity between 1936 and 1956. The humor of most of these poems is understated and polite, seldom resorting to the kind of verbal jollity normally associated with light verse.

Affection tempers satire without dulling it in most of these poems, of which the most interesting is a recent "frolic—with apologies to Wallace Stevens." In a

Books by John Wheelock

VERSES BY TWO UNDERGRADUATES (with Van Wyck Brooks)

Boston: privately printed, 1905.

THE HUMAN FANTASY

Boston: Sherman, French, 1911. \$1.25.

THE BELOVED ADVENTURE

Boston: Sherman, French, 1912. \$1.50.

LOVE AND LIBERATION

Boston: Sherman, French, 1913. \$1.50.

ALAN SEEGER: POET OF THE FOREIGN LEGION

New York: Scribners, 1918.

DUST AND LIGHT

New York: Scribners, 1919. \$1.50.

A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT

New York: Scribners, 1920. \$2.00.

THE BLACK PANTHER

New York: Scribners, 1922. \$1.50.

THE BRIGHT DOOM

New York: Scribners, 1927. \$2.00.

POEMS, 1911-1936

New York: Scribners, 1936. \$2.50.

London: Scribners, 1936. 12/6.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER (comp. by Alice Dalglish, trans. by Wheelock)

New York: Scribners, 1939. \$1.50.

London: Scribners, 1939. 5s.

THE FACE OF A NATION: POETICAL PASSAGES FROM

THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS WOLFE (ed.)

New York: Scribners, 1939. \$2.75.

little over a hundred lines, "The Plumber as the Missing Letter" combines a parody of Stevens with a humorous poem on the hopelessness of getting a plumber to do anything. Having summoned the plumber and his helper, only to have them inspect the premises and depart for more tools, the householder, while awaiting the return of "the fictive pair," falls asleep over a volume by Wallace Stevens:

Of what swank paradiso shall he dream,
Land of swart dames seductive, the cohesive
Feminine, woman the universal glue;
Land of chubbed grapes and peaches, land of prime
Poets, de jure some, some few de facto—

EDITOR TO AUTHOR: THE LETTERS OF MAXWELL PERKINS (ed.)

New York: Scribners, 1950. \$3.75.

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1950. \$5.00.

New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1960. \$1.45. (pa.)

London: Mayflower, 1960. 12s. (pa.)

New York: Scribners, 1964. \$1.45. (pa.)

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1964. \$1.50. (pa.)

POEMS, OLD AND NEW

New York: Scribners, 1956. \$4.50.

London: Scribners, 1956. 21s.

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1956. \$4.50.

POETS OF TODAY I-VIII (ed.)

New York: Scribners, 1954-1961. \$3.95.

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1954-1961. \$5.25.

THE GARDENER AND OTHER POEMS

New York: Scribners, 1961. \$3.95.

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1961. \$3.95.

WHAT IS POETRY?

New York: Scribners, 1963. \$3.50.

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1963. \$4.50.

New York: Scribners, 1965. \$1.25. (pa.)

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1965. \$1.55 (pa.)

DEAR MEN AND WOMEN

New York: Scribners, 1966. \$3.50.

Toronto: S. J. R. Saunders, 1966. \$4.50.

BY DAYLIGHT AND IN DREAM:

NEW AND COLLECTED POEMS, 1904-1970

New York: Scribners, 1970. \$6.95.

Shall not the pumpkins on the pensive boughs
Hang heavier there than here, the birds employ
A brisker breast-stroke, be more nude than here;
More pleasing to the sense, nimbler than here,
The sea's blue thunder, the curved smell of the sea?

Some things here are intrinsically attractive, and have found their way into Wheelock's serious work, as in this passage from "Anima," first collected in *The Gardener* (1961):

The silence there
Had a certain thing to say could not be said
By harp or oboe, flute or violoncello,

Or by the lesser strings; it could not be said
 By the human voice; but in sea-sounds you heard it
 Perhaps, or in the water-dripping jargon
 Of summer birds: endless reiteration
 Of chat or vireo, the woodcock's call,
 Chirrup and squeegee, larrup, squirt and trill
 Of liquid syringes—bright drops of song
 Spangling the silence.

The energy and metrical variety of this passage convey, more clearly than could any direct statement in the earlier poems, Wheelock's love of the universe. His eye, despite the ingenious lists, is more narrowly focused on its primary object, and he is able to imply a great deal more than he states. One source of this confidence and renewed responsibility is advancing age; and with that has come a focal point for some of Wheelock's finest poems; he returns again and again to his father's house in Bonac, which, with its lifelong associations, becomes a point of departure for meditations of great depth and powerful serenity:

This is enchanted country, lies under a spell,
 Bird-haunted, ocean-haunted—land of youth,
 Land of first love, land of death also, perhaps,
 And desired return.

—"Bonac"

If age often brings the desire to recapture the past, it also brings, in Wheelock's case, an ability to capture what eluded the younger poet: patience, and a steady eye on the words themselves, as well as what they stand for. These qualities were widely recognized in *The Gardener* (1961), which was co-winner of the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, and which exhibits what Allen Tate later called "that 'middle style' which circumvents fashion and never is out of fashion." And here, too, fresh tensions arise from what is less directly stated; music, movement, and statement combine to transcend the nominal subject of the poem, as in the last stanzas of the title poem:

O father, whom I may no more embrace
 In childish fervor, but, standing far apart,
 Look on your spirit rather than your face,

Time now has touched me also, and my heart
 Has learned a sadness that yours earlier knew,
 Who labored here, though with the greater art.

The truth is on me now that was with you:
 How life is sweet, even its very pain,
 The years how fleeting and the days how few.

Truly, your labors have not been in vain;
 These woods, these walks, these gardens—everywhere
 I look, the glories of your love remain.

Therefore, for you, now beyond praise or prayer,
 Before the night falls that shall make us one,
 In which neither of us will know or care,

This kiss, father, from him who was your son.

The central tension here is not merely that between youth and age, or past and present; it arises gradually from the speaker's realization that he would not recapture his youth even if he could. He comes first to accept the unifying process which ends in death, and then to celebrate it.

If *The Gardener* was the work of a man who had found his true voice in age, *Dear Men and Women* (1966) was the work of a man to whom age had given a new way of treating an old theme; the lost love of the youthful lyrics has been regained, and informs several remarkable poems, notably "Eight Sonnets," a sequence in which Wheelock not only redeems what a young poet might find an unpromising subject—serene love and happiness between two aged people—but in which he also unifies the various sources of his feeling—love, the old house, and the perpetual sound of the sea:

Great trees encircle her; her praise shall be
 The thrush's song; the sea-wind for delight
 Buffets her cheek while, massive in its might,
 Around these island solitudes, the sea,
 Chanting, like voices from eternity,
 Will shake the shore with thunders, day and night.

—"A Garden and a Face"

These poems pulsate with a kind of knowledge rare in love poetry: we cannot quite respond with the shock of recognition, but must instead take it on faith that such deep, abiding love is like this; but our faith is strengthened by the conviction of the poems:

Outside, the darkness deepens, and I guess
 What darker things the years may hold in store—
 Watching your face, even lovelier than before
 Age had given it this grave tenderness
 Love stretches hands toward, that would shield and
 bless

A face, once young, in age loved all the more.

—"Slow Summer Twilight"

And in "The Sea's Voice," the expanded vision of age results in an inclusive emotion which had seemed forced in the earlier poems, but which is natural and convincing here:

Our talk has been all banter, to-and-fro
 Of raillery, the bland mischief of your smile
 Still leads me on, with nonsense we beguile
 An empty hour: we speak of So-and-So,
 Of Eliot and Michelangelo,
 And of James Jones, his high, pedantic style,

And touch, by chance, after a little while,
Upon some sadness suffered years ago.

Now your eyes darken, turning serious,
As thoughts of the long past, by memory stirred
Waken—life's venture, tragic and absurd,
How strange it is, how brief, how hazardous.
Far-off, the sea's voice says it all for us,
Saying one thing forever, barely heard.

Beside the main threads—love and the place where it has deepened—which are the basis of this sequence, there are interwoven other strands of thought which develop and subside almost imperceptibly. The sound of the sea, knowledge of mortality, and, finally, celebration of all these, enable Wheelock to confront the universe, in the final sonnet, with this statement of earned belief:

The old inexorable mysteries
Transcend our sorrow; no more discord jars
That music, which no lesser music mars—
It was enough to have made peace with these:
To have kept high hearts among the galaxies,
Love's faith amid this wilderness of stars.

—"In This Green Nook"

The earlier poems of resignation and acceptance suffered from a lack of irony, and seemed too abject; but here, irony is not needed, for the tone of resignation is strengthened by the tone of celebration, which in turn lends force to the aging poet's speculations on death. In "The Part Called Age," an extended reverie on the past, and the sudden realization that age has come, Wheelock recalls part of an earlier poem, "House in Bonac," and turns from recollection toward the future:

The house he had once compared to "a great ship
foundered
At the bottom of green sea-water" now seemed to him,
As it lay there lonely in the sad evening light,
More like a ship on some vast voyage bound
Into the unknown seas of space and time . . .
. . . Where was the old ship steering,
Through a darkness such as had never before been
known
In the long history of man? There was no foretelling.
There was none could say. But of one thing he was
sure:
The fragile network of love that binds together
Spirit and spirit, over the whole earth,
Love . . .
. . . is the only answer, the only atonement,
Redeeming all. Far over, a waking star
Glimmered in the west of heaven. He opened the
door,

And entered the house, the ship, where so many
others
Had embarked as passengers, where one passenger
now,
The dearest of all, awaited him. Quietly
He turned the key in the lock, and gave the good
ship
To night and darkness and the oncoming stars.

So Wheelock ends where he began—with love—but with this major difference: in its private fulfillment, his love has broadened, and encompasses more than the woman addressed in "Eight Sonnets"; she animates the house in Bonac, which Wheelock has called "cradle and grave" of his poems, and from that house, with its myriad associations, the poet's love extends toward everything. Even fear and dejection, which once seemed too actively courted, are given their rightful place in this poetic universe; the aging spirit does what it can by taking everything as it comes.

This inclusiveness marks the new poems which open *By Daylight and In Dream*; the title poem, for example, is one of the longest and most ambitious poems Wheelock has attempted, and it is one of the most successful. It is in three parts; the first, "Monday," is a meditation arising from the speaker's view through his window of his "loved, familiar country," and is chiefly concerned with the knowledge of impending death. The idea is approached indirectly at

Emily Knew About Atoms

Quit hunting a rhyme for
Emily, the illusion is over.
There are thousands of people
sitting on steps
wondering where
the morning went.

Emily knew about atoms.
Propriety claimed no naked
atoms go floating through
her widow's peak. She
dressed them into poems.

—ANN DARR

first, in almost surrealistic images of the union between the man and his world:

... birds
Fly in and out of his eyes . . .
... blue sea-odors inhabit him,
Waves crash in his head . . .

When direct confrontation comes, the speaker finds his terrors and desires inexpressible, and drifts into a tentative resignation to an old idea:

We must yield place to those who will come after,
As those before us yielded. Confusedly
He hears, deep in himself, yet far away,
Oceanic voices.

"Tuesday," the long second section, begins in the early evening; the old man stands at a west window, seeing his father's eye in a blue patch of the sunset, and he remembers an old debate between father and son, involving the old questions of conscious and unconscious forces in the universe; the young man argues for the former. But as the memory fades, the speaker accepts the latter view; almost consoled, he turns toward his bed:

Why, the whole earth
Is holy ground, hallowed by love and pain—
The graveyard of the self-effacing dead,
Crowded with sacrificial absences!

As he prepares for sleep, he almost finds contentment in the idea of oblivion:

Opening the window
The cry of a whip-poor-will out of the darkness
Seems to him now the sound of his own voice crying
Back to him out of the darkness. For a few moments,
He stands there, listening. He turns off the light,
Letting the darkness in.

In the final section, "Tuesday Night: His Dream," the exploration of these contradictory attitudes is strongly concluded, though not resolved. The old man dreams of sleeping under a tree, listening to three voices: a mysterious child, the sea, and a thrush. The child assures him the birth and death are part of a cycle which will return all lost things to him; the sea urges him to give over to the past, which is oblivion; and the thrush speaks of a youthful future. Near the close of the poem, the old man dreams he is ensnared in the tree's roots, and he cries out for help:

And the tree,
That is more silent than the grave, for answer,
Rains down upon him all her bounty of bloom,
Her springtime burden, her glory of teeming blossoms;
And he looks up, startled, sensing in sudden joy,
'I am no longer afraid'; and the tree releases
him . . .

... and he wakes from dream,
To hear, far off, the sea's lamentation
Along these desolate coasts of night and day;
And still the thrush sings on.

It is a commonplace that to approach broad abstractions directly is rarely successful in poetry; as Wheelock himself has said, during a television interview, "You have to sort of pretend you aren't really trying to do it; sort of walking around it, thinking of something else; because if you go at it too quickly and too hard, it gets away from you." As I have indicated, youthful impatience kept Wheelock from working this way for many years; but he has learned that lesson now. The old ideas in "By Daylight and In Dream" live again because they have been allowed, rather than forced, to live: they have been carried by the music and the characterization, to which most of Wheelock's energy has been devoted.

Finally, though, the depth of character in this poem is partly achieved by the rest of the large collection, the record of a poet's progress through all that has elapsed of this century. Much of this work is bound to endure; but whatever judgements the future makes on it, it is hard, now, to greet it with anything but the kind of celebration Wheelock displays in another new poem, "The Ascent of Man":

Surely, he enters now that dark wood
Where, as Dante tells us, the right way is lost,
From which, as Dante discovered, there is no escape
Save by descent into hell and purgatory,
And thence, if so may be,
Out of the torments of fire and ice,
All perils passed,
Guided by love at last,
Up the long steep ascent to paradise.

—HENRY TAYLOR

To Lorca

We will not find you
though the afternoon sleeps like Egyptian gold,
though our feet may pause on your groin,
though the two moles on your cheek nourish that phlox
and the white snails of your eyes are melted by lime.

What you were is the thirst of an orange tree,
the fire of those ants in its roots.
What you are is whatever we seek.

—LARRY JOHNSON

Xmas Tree

We had brought it home in the cold—
snow frozen to its branches—

Mother gathered the boxes and prunings
and worried what she would do
if pine pitch got on the white rug.

The vacuum cleaner worked overtime
collecting fallen needles.

But above all else she wanted
the ice left outside

like the tale you heard from a friend
who heard it from a friend.

We built the tree that way each year—
to mark somehow the birthday
of the man whose father
loved wood.

—THOMAS MILLIGAN

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