An Investigation of the "Fragile Escape" in the Work of Elinor Wylie

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE "FRAGILE ESCAPE"
IN THE WORK OF ELINOR WYLIE

By

Claribel A. Moroney

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CHAPTER I

THE ISMS OF THE 1920'S

Literature, like art, music, science, or history, is not suddenly different in one period from what it was in the period preceding or from what it will be immediately following. The literature of today is the literature of the past in new combinations and with new emphases. The many movements which manifested themselves during the decade under discussion had their roots in inspirations, influences, and efforts of writers who lived before.

The author about whom this thesis is written, Elinor Wylie, was influenced by the movements or "isms", as they shall be hitherto known, in a greater or less degree, becoming herself a symbol of the "ism" which shall be last in this discussion.

"For centuries, literature was dominated by a mood of calm serenity, life and civilization firmly established, restraint and self possession and a sense of decorum were in control."¹ This gave to literature the period thought of as classicism.

As authority, discipline, and elegance went out with classicism, willfulness, strangeness, and wonder came in with romanticism.

Literature had been ebullient, enthusiastic, had given itself over to dreams and idealization in the manner of youth, a mood which characterized the Renaissance and early nineteenth century in Europe and America. This enthusiasm was called the romantic temper.2

A step beyond romanticism produced in literature a movement known as aestheticism. To many, for whom science seemed to establish the meaningless purpose of all existence and all striving, the ivory tower of art furnished the only solace and refuge.

Only in discerning beauty in the passing show, since all action is beyond our power, and we must do as the eternal laws of nature bid us, can man find that which will make his existence worth while and lift him above the brute. For many a despairing soul during the last few generations, it has seemed that man’s hopes can rest only in the ideal world of beauty; and aestheticism has proved the natural way of life in the Alien World.3

2 Ibid., p. 1.

While beauty in form, in color, in sound, in expression, in work, in play, in devotion, and in spirit are essential to man's world of contentment and understanding, his hopes do not depend specifically upon this qualification. His intellect, sincerity, ambition, love and religion, are more completely developed if the quality of beauty is injected into the process of growth. Ideal beauty, however, set up as a goal probably would contribute little as a single means of accomplishing man's ultimate end.

Beauty in personal adornment, beauty in surroundings reflected in Elinor Wylie's fascination of places and things, rare and expensive in taste, and beauty in thoughts which she possessed so thoroughly and which she expressed in her carefully chosen way, were the strains of a well-rounded and elaborately provided life which Elinor Wylie experienced, the memories of which saved her from despair in her later life.

The imagists, a group of poets strongly influenced by French symbolism, were fundamentally lyric poets, "and their dominant tendency was to render life not in terms of story or dramatic characterization, nor again, in terms of abstract thought and sentiment, but in terms of impression." 4

These impressions they endeavored to convey, as Miss Lowell says, not through vague generalities, "but by images which render particulars exactly." American poetry still is showing the influence of the Imagists as these stanzas from Mr. Archibald Mac Leish's "Ars Poetica" will bear witness:

A poem should be equal to:
Not true

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights
above the sea ---

A poem should not mean
But be.

Many imagists desired to create physical impressions which were symbols of emotions not stated and yet arranged into patterns that gave abstract intellectual effects. Such abstract effects are suggested by Carl Sandburg's "Cadenza" and "Broken Face Gargoyles" from which descriptive elements have been rigorously eliminated.5

The imagist saw individual ideas in a particular shape while the impressionist saw less vividly the outline of the idea. He instead saw a mass whose "feelings" he wished also to interpret.

5 Ibid., p. 398.
In 1874, the French painter, Monet, labeled one of his canvases "Sunrise - an Impression" and started a controversy that has not yet been settled. Novelists like Crane and Conrad, as well as poets like Mallarme, were beginning to do the same thing in literature where the technique consisted of reducing prose or verse to a procession of images. 6

The impressionist writer, like the impressionist painter, saw his subject less in terms of the outline which is known to be there and more in terms of the mass which strikes the eye. The impressionist novelist adhered to the tight line of his plot and maintained steadily a chosen point of view. The impressionist poet was not concerned with the dramatic shape of the things, but with the living "feel" of it. "Any piece of impressionism, whether it be prose, or verse, or painting, or sculpture, is the record of the impression of the moment." 7

In contrast to impressionism is expressionism. The term expressionism indicates, somewhat loosely, a variety of tendencies opposed to the formerly prevailing literalness in the rendering of life. While the impressionist undertook to give a precise impression of the look of the object

6 Hartwick, op. cit., p. 37.

7 Ford Madox Hueffer, "On Impressionism", Poetry and Drama, II (December, 1914), 140.
studied, the expressionist, on the contrary, was concerned with the meaning or essence of the object. He neglected perspective and made use of any dimension to locate the interior meaning of the thing with which he was concerned.

In the movement known as symbolism, it was the nature of the poet to suggest rather than state, to express a musical vagueness rather than a definite shape, to not always understand his own imaginings or interpret them in the same way. "... when he trafficks in medieval magic and Indian philosophy, it is natural that the modern mind should be bewildered and repelled."

A searching revision of the picture of American life which American fiction had been drawing was in demand following the heroic and romantic outlines drawn by writers immediately preceding. Before the first World War both the romantic and realistic traditions had been disturbed by a naturalism which tried to dig conscientiously beneath the surface of American life. The naturalism which emerged in this period was not so much a deliberate principle or a definite school as a variety of dissents from the official type of realism favored.

The novel, a powerful agency for civilization, must go deeper than it had gone in the United States, must turn to the light many ugly realities, hitherto neglected, which were growing more ominous every day. It must deal candidly with political corruption, economic injustice, religious unrest, sexual irregularities, with greed and doubt and hate and cruelty and violence as well as with more customary subjects. 9

Concerning the technique of the naturalist, the statement is made: "Naturalism in its purpose to serve 'a slice of life' all but discarded plot. It might be said of plot, that it was sired by Aristotle, nursed into full growth by Dumas, and buried by Zola." 10

Hartwick says further:

The naturalist writer found himself laced into a strait-jacket of natural law, willing to accept the modern world of science and take things as he found them. He believed man's duty was to recognize in his instincts the signals of Nature, and obey wherever they led. He believed too, he should forfeit the idea of ethical perfection, and abandon such chimeras as sympathy, chivalry, patriotism, charity, purity, generosity, altruism, honor, justice, courtesy, loyalty, truth, and conscience. 11

11 Hartwick, op. cit., p. 169.
And again Hartwick says of the naturalist:

Consistency is a quality the naturalist abhorred. He was fond of delusive gestures and emotional detours. Very often he does not know where he is going or what he is talking about, in spite of the fact that he always winds up saluting laissez faire, the noble savage, and "return to Nature".12

Not every American writer became a naturalist. A few, disgusted by the sordid materialism and ugliness upon which writers were concentrating, left the path to pursue a literature fancifully poetic, subtle, delicate in expression, and fragile in its escape.

To escape from the literature which presented its material too realistically or in too sordid a manner was the express desire of a group of writers of which Elinor Wylie was one.

The escapist writer felt that the masses could not appreciate beauty, serenity, or culture, that they cared more for Irving Berlin than for Bach, more for the comic strips than El Greco, more for "bread and circuses than for the old gesture toward the stars", more for the present than the past.13

12 Ibid., p. 175.
13 Ibid., p. 225.
Cabell says of the escapist:

The poetry of the escapist is in exact truth a criticism of life. It is a poetry -- a "making" which thereafter goes on to set a better example by creating a really acceptable sort of world exhilarated by congenial inhabitants.14

According to Irving Babbitt: "Poetry and life, beauty and reality, the escapist feels, are irreconcilably opposed to each other and he for his part is on the side of poetry and the ideal."15 Still another view of the escapist is that he does not believe that society is making progress; rather that man is going backward, that yesterday was a more desirable day to live than the present.

There were, too, among the escapist writers those less interested in the orchidaceous and therefore they turned to such types of escape fiction as the "folksy" story by Booth Tarkington; the "hammock book", a sparkling cocktail of young love; tales of adventure; the detective or mystery story; the historical novel which deserts the present for customs of a time long dead; and romance, a variety with a strong tincture of the "unreal".16


16 Hartwick, op. cit., p. 174.
There are few barriers in the way of sounding out the purpose of the escapist, which is merely to get away from the world of "fact and fatality" by dreams or other methods. He bolts the workaday scene, pretends that he is living in a more congenial age or clime, and "makes believe" that the older glories of man and America have not been eclipsed by newer and less enchanting ones. His days are trances, a mélange of comfortable pretenses, masking his environment in the cosmetics of fancy. He is one who has "hitched his wagon to a star", who in every adversity runs (not walks) to the nearest exit.

Dreamer of dreams he argues:
Born out of my time
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day. 17

William Wylie wrote during a period when the pendulum of literature was swinging ferociously away from the naturalist and realist who had dominated the preceding era.

with sordid facts, ugly facts, plain facts, and simple facts. Like many of her contemporaries the desire to free herself from the bonds of realism caused her to create a world of her own.

Into the writing of Elinor Wylie was molded the influences of these various literary movements, or "isms". Particularly do her few but outstanding works contain those qualifications of the escapist which she as one of many was experiencing. From a factual-minded, scientific, and outspoken era of writing emerged a writer fancifully poetic, subtle and delicate in expression.
CHAPTER II

ESCAPE FOR WYLIE AND HER CONTEMPORARIES,

CABELL AND HERGESHEIMER

The tendency of Elinor Wylie was to swing like a pendulum from one extreme, where she satisfied the desires of her more passive reader, to the other, where she cried out with vigor for relief from whatever was easily and popularly accepted. It was during one of these periods of unrest that Elinor Wylie and two of her contemporaries, namely, James Branch Cabell and Joseph Hergesheimer, sought to protest against the literature which was presenting too obviously the actual, the true, the real.

While each of these three writers was like the other in that he sought escape from virtually the same thing, yet each had his own way of expressing this escape and of making his writing distinctly his own. Cabell itched to escape from the pedestrian world. It is because he was terrified at the meanness of what practical men call reality, that Mr. Cabell turned away from it to find the true life in dreams.¹ His latest book Smrt (1934), which he subtitled

"An Urbane Nightmare", is an excursion into the land of dreams. And in his book, The Lady of Our Dreams (The Certain Hour) one reads: "It is not the actual world they tell about, but a vastly superior place where the Dream is realized and everything which we knew was possible comes true." In defense of Cabell's interpretation of the dream, Miss Williams states:

It must be remembered that Mr. Cabell's mystic concept sees reality in the dream, even as it recognizes in reality a mysticism all its own. Felix Kennaston's reflections convey as much, and in a manner that inevitably carries conviction, they are the author's.

Hartwick registers pleasure in the charm of Cabell's strange escape: "In the land of Poictesme, in his Biography, he has built himself a sanctuary, hatched a microcosmic world of magic, knavery, and imagination, and become a citizen of it." But he created in Poictesme an extremely beautiful world, which is also realistic.

Cabell's ability to weave reality and magic is

3 Blanche C. Williams, Our Short Story Writers (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920), p. 28.
Joseph Warren Beach's point in this quotation:

In Cabell's work implicitly or explicitly, the natural and the magical, the ideal and the dreary matter of fact, interpenetrate one another in a sort of "misty mid region" or borderland of real and imaginary. 5

Whether Mr. Cabell wished to create a realistic impression is doubtful. He has had no patience with the methods or point of view of the realist:

No one on the preferable side of Bedlam wishes to be reminded of what we are in actuality, even were it possible, by any disastrous miracle, ever to dispel the mist which romance has evoked about all human doings. 6

Mr. Cabell began to write when the romantic movement was in full swing. His hostility to realism and his belief that literature is primarily escape and compensation rather than confrontation, mark him as a scholar of culture and refined tastes.

Stevenson had left behind him a fine crop of cloak and sword artifices. In the fierce swing-back


toward realism that followed, we were carried, it may be, too far in the opposite direction. It is probable that Cabell was conscious in the very beginning of this impending reaction.  

Romantic fiction furnishes a literature of evasion. It allows us to escape from complications, the fret, the strain of living. Carl Van Doren has remarked:

The difference between Mr. Cabell and the popular romancers, who in all ages clutter the scene and for whom he has nothing but amused contempt, is that they are unconscious dupes of demiurge whereas he, aware of its ways and its devices, employs it almost as if it were some hippogriff bridled by him in Elysian pastures and respectfully entertained in a snug Virginian stable. His attitude toward romance suggests a cheerful despair; he despairs of ever finding anything truer than romance.

Truth is considered by Mr. Cabell one of the essential virtues that contributes to literary permanence. Yet, states Boynton, he contended that "the only tolerable truth is the truth which repudiates the sordid and homely and


wearisome facts."\textsuperscript{9} In \textit{Beyond Life} he says:

Really there should be no trifling with facts, for always the ever present danger exists that, in treating of the life immediately about him, even the unobservant literary genius may notice that this life for the most part consists of ugly and stupid persons doing foolish things, and will take a despondent view of the probable outcome.\textsuperscript{10}

In \textit{These Restless Heads} (1932) he has told how different were his own artistic aims from those of his contemporaries. "There is no doubt that he is in pursuit of truth as well as beauty. Only the truth he seeks is not the truth of 'life' so much as the truth of human nature."\textsuperscript{11}

Mr. Cabell desires, too, to write perfectly of beautiful happenings, and the intensity of this desire burns purposefully throughout his works. He cites Gautier's words to the point that "everything passes but art."\textsuperscript{12} The great body of his work celebrates undying love and imperishable beauty.

\textsuperscript{9} Boynton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{10} Williams, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 24-25.
\textsuperscript{11} Beach, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{12} Williams, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 23.
Van Doren comments concerning the wide range of time covered by Cabell:

In The Line of Love and The Certain Hour he ranged from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth, in several of the stories choosing episodes about history which is partly silent in the lives of its eminent men and women: a late meeting of Falstaff with a boyhood sweetheart, the forced decision of Villon to turn thief, the final interview of Marlowe with a girl he loves, the apocryphal courtship of Katherine of Valois and Henry V, the philosophical plagiarism of Shakespeare in writing The Tempest, the mysterious death of the poet Herrick, the marriage of Wycherly to the Countess of Drogheda and of Sheridan to the irresistible Miss Ogle.13

How much he is annoyed by Cabell's free range of time and facts is shown again by Boynton:

Aware that on the whole fancy is more important than fact to Mr. Cabell, the reader is distracted and annoyed by circumstantial matters of chronology and genealogy which delay action and throw no light on motive.14

Guilfoil sees deeper and emits a word of praise:

13 Van Doren, op. cit., p. 316.
14 Boynton, op. cit., p. 80.
Like most of Mr. Cabell's works, this story will undoubtedly evoke a chorus of praise from those critics who see in the dreamlike character of his writing a truer reality than the naturalism of his contemporaries who shun such methods.  

Van Doren defends Mr. Cabell's confusing and disordered geography in his lands of fancy.

One British critic and rival of Mr. Cabell has lately fretted over the unblushing anachronisms and confused geography of this parti-colored world. For less dull-witted scholars these are the very cream of the Cabellian jest.

Miss Williams has no difficulty in placing Cabell at the top of the romanticist ladder. She says of him:

"Ideal Beauty, Ideal Love, and a Dream World belong to the romanticist. And it is through his concepts of these terms and the exercise of his talents with them that James Branch Cabell over-tops all other romantic writers in America."

What to say of Cabell is a mystery to Walpole who

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15 Kelsey Guilfoil, Review of "There Were Two Pirates", *Chicago Tribune*, August 11, 1946, Part IV, p. 3.


17 Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
concludes:

Let it be said at once that Cabell's art will always be a sign for hostilities. Not only will he remain, in all probability, forever alien to the general public, but he will also, I suspect, be to the end of time a cause for division among cultivated and experienced readers.¹⁸

A sincere word of appreciation of the escape Cabell provides is made by Wagenknecht:

And the service he performed for imaginative literature, and for faith itself, when he carried their banners, at a slightly cocky angle, straight through the dark night of the materialistic, complacent, self-satisfied 20's, has never received anything like the praise it deserves.¹⁹

Opinions pro and con concerning Cabell's ability as a writer agree on one thing, namely that he, Cabell, was anxious to escape the real world so that man might live as completely, as satisfactorily as the world of imagination graciously permitted him to live.

A close alliance in purpose in the work of

¹⁸ Walpole, op. cit., p. 6.

Hergesheimer and Cabell is evident in the dream plots around which each author wrote. Each was searching for satisfaction and only found his goal through escape into the unreal. Hartwick notes the similarity of desire in each: "Joseph Hergesheimer's stories are constructed on lines of a quest; his formula like Cabell's, the search for something "beyond life." Hergesheimer and Cabell are most interested in flight from an America that does not satisfy them. However, both are glad that they have been spared, as Hergesheimer puts it, "the dreary and impertinent duty of improving the world." Both Hergesheimer and Cabell lament the hostility of our realistic generation to sentiment, and regret the passing of such values as serenity, gallantry, self-sacrifice, loyalty, individualism, beauty, and tradition.

Joseph Hergesheimer believed that people wrote books as an escape -- either as protest or as recreation.

With him it was wholly a compensating process. He writes himself out of the world, as he dreamed himself out of the world in his youth. Out of a wretchedly timorous boyhood, in which he suffered violent illnesses.

20 Hartwick, op. cit., p. 199.

21 Ibid., p. 194.
with their resultant handicaps, he created brave incredulous dreams.22

Of Hergesheimer's escape Boynton says:

Dreams, in which he sets up an unattainable goal, are his method of escape. . . . the near approach to any object of desire dissolves the dream and recalls the present, but casts over the present something of the aura of the far away.23

One manifestation of Mr. Hergesheimer's talent lies in his seizing upon prehistoric or historic types and making them at home in the twentieth century. Haardt criticizes Hergesheimer's "painful world" in the following manner:

Particularly, does he bring to his readers, settings from a painful world, in which he suffered acutely from noise and hypocrisy -- the Massachusetts coast during its great sailing days or rather (and better) at the end of those days, in Java Head; the three glimpses, one eighteenth century, one mid-nineteenth, and one present day of the Pennsylvania iron fields,


23 Boynton, op. cit., pp. 150-151.
He has congratulated himself on the fact that he has been able to produce narratives set in the past without being labeled an historical novelist.

He began as a painter and still brings to literature a painter's eye, delighted with colors and shapes and textures, the more luxurious the better. Squire points out the minute detail and extreme delight of Hergesheimer in painting word pictures: "At times, he can be positively cloying, burying his people under a heap of bright stuffs and dazzling bric-a-brac."25 His very passion for luxurious decoration is a trap for him in the settings of the past. He is so anxious to spread the captivating scene before us, so anxious that we should remark this loveliness now faded, that there are times when his people can hardly move for their clothes and furniture and embellishments and grumble that their creator is smothering their drama. "There must be crinoline -- would I never escape from that? . . .

24 Haardt, op. cit., p. 402.

candelabra with glittering prisms; Spanish soldiers in striped linen and officials with green-tasseled canes."

But his passion for these things, -- though born with the painter -- is really a literary one, like that of the earlier Keats. This delight of the eye is an essential part of the world he creates, and the beautiful things in it are not merely so much captivating form and color, but so many centers around which there quickly cluster all manner of associations, sentiments, memories, and are, too, symbols exquisitely embodying an idea. The doll, Cytherea, in the novel by the same name, has always represented something unknown that he desired. She was a doll, more fascinating than any living woman, but she stood for a principle.

Hergesheimer's refusal to live in the world of realism is substantiated in his creation of a world of his own:

Like all original novelists, Mr. Hergesheimer has created a world of his own. That enormous tangle of relationships with which fiction commonly deals is hardly present at all in his work, and then only lightly touched. The continuous minor tragi-comedy of

work-a-day existence has no real place in his fiction.27

While he has given his narratives a purely objective, solidly rounded appearance, leaving them as vivid in the memory as a real experience, he has also made his fiction as subjective in essence as a lyric. Squire says further:

He has been equally successful with both the brocade and the dream, leaving the one shining in our hands while the other goes filter -- through our minds, our imagination being thus doubly captured for a while by his vision of life.28

No present day writer is more delicately adjusted, physically and aesthetically, to the cosmic realm of dream, than Mr. Hergesheimer. As Cabell puts it, "to turn from actual life to Joseph Hergesheimer's pages arouses a sensation somewhat akin to that sustained by a myopic person when he puts on spectacles."29

Williams says of Cabell and Hergesheimer:

27 Squire, op. cit., p. 182.
28 Ibid., p. 203.
29 Williams, op. cit., p. 235.
Of the two motives in operation behind the writing of fiction, criticism of life and the desire to escape life, one cannot fail to notice the striking similarity in aim and purpose of Mr. Hergesheimer and Mr. Cabell's writings. Their resemblance lies in the search for beauty, and in their common concept of the great and only human struggle -- that between the ideal and the practical, the visionary and the real.30

The paramount idea in the work of both Hergesheimer and Cabell was the creation of a world of fantasy, in which the practical and the ideal, the visionary and the real become one. In spite of their differences in presentation, their similarities are numerous enough to cause them to be classed together and with them is listed Minor Wylie. Her desire too, to escape from the literature of the realist is only different from theirs in the manner in which her ideas are presented. Her gentle, dainty, and fragile designs created with words so carefully chosen become intricate patterns of crystal and porcelain. Hers, too, was a world of fancy.

Joseph Warren Beach includes Mrs. Wylie in his list of prominent writers whose work tended toward the fantastic. He states:

30 Ibid., p. 224.
We have had a good deal of this tendency to the fantastic in English and American fiction of the present century. We have had ... Sir James Barrie's *Little White Bird* (1902), the scientific and utopian romances of H. G. Wells from *The Time Machine* (1895) to *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham* (1930), W. H. Hudson's *Green Mansions* (1904) and *A Crystal Age* (1906), G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). And we have had the post-war crop of fantasy: Walter de la Mare's *Memoirs of a Midget* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* (1921), Christopher Morley's *Thunder on the Left* (1925). . . . David Garnett has reintroduced the medieval theme of animal transformation in *Lady into Fox* (1922). And Elinor Wylie has ventured something still stranger and more fantastic in *The Venetian Glass Nephew* (1925).

Elinor Wylie, like Mr. Cabell and Mr. Hergesheimer, sought refuge from the realism which was then sounding the dominant note in literature. Through escape they hoped to enrich mankind by entertaining it with distinction and clarity, beauty and proportion, tenderness and truth and urbanity. Elinor Wylie's more fragile approach reflects a pleasant spirit injected even into the unhappier events of her life.

Harriet Monroe laments the late entrance Miss Wylie

31 Beach, op. cit., pp. 488-489.
made into the field of literature: "To be sure, she began later than most poets, never discovering her literary gift until she was well past thirty and disciplined by a tragic experience of life."\(^{32}\) Her poems say with a sparkle of rich many-colored glazes, like eighteenth century French porcelains, that life is fragile in its intolerable beauty.

In "Three wishes" she pointedly asks, "Are you afraid of cold deep death?" But the question does not frighten you since she approaches it in a maze of color:

Sink out of being, and go down, 
go down
Through the steep layers of emerald and jade
With warm thin skin of turquoise overlaid,
Where the slow coral spins a ghostly town
Of tower and minaret and fretted crown,
Give up your breath in sleep's subaqueous shade,
Hold to oblivion; are you afraid
Of cold deep death? Are you afraid to drown?\(^{33}\)

So much did she meditate on the fragility of life that she created in her poems as well as her prose porcelain figures easily crushed, representing life’s end, but quickly mended suggesting the influence of one’s life upon others.

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In Miss Monroe's opinion Elinor Wylie's work has the necessary qualities for withstanding the trials of time. She says of her art:

Her art, allies itself with the eighteenth century, not so much with the poetry of that period as with those other arts, at once hard as jewels and supremely delicate, which must pass through fire to earn perfection.34

Mrs. Wylie's ability to create images which are often startling, unusual, or daring distinguishes her among poets of her time. In "Lilliputian" she says:

She hoards green cheeses
On a high moonlight shelf;
Her tea-kettle freezes
The child is an elf.

Her shiny mind is peopled
By brisk goblins, but
Though castled and steepled
The place is Lilliput:

Where I lie bound by subtle
Spider-web and hair,
And the small feet scuttle,
And the gold eyes stare.35

A shiny mind peopled by brisk goblins! Hoarding green cheeses on a moonlit shelf! A frozen tea-kettle, and gold eyes that stare! Surely these are not metaphors of

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34 Monroe, op. cit., p. 268.
35 Black Armour - "Lilliputian" - p. 67.
the mediocre poet.

Loggins believed Miss Wylie had the power to charm her reader into a world of her own. He points out:

There is an inner rhythm in her music and a hidden background in her imagery which captures the reader's subtler consciousness. She draws from him what Coleridge called, "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith." The reader does what she tells him to do: he loses contact with the "hate fostering warmth of the reeking herd", and becomes the "eagle soaring above the clouds" or the "mole holding intercourse with the roots of trees."36

Zabel sees in her work the dainty fairy and eerie witch symbols as well as exquisite patterns and distinctive colors. He says of Miss Wylie's work:

Like Miss Sitwell's her mind operated best under the spur of allegory, and thus her pages spill with meteors, moonstones, goblins, knights, fairy goldsmiths, mandrakes, blackamoors, and saints; with filagree, mistletoe, snowflakes, stalactites, bronze, goldfish, silver moonbeams.37

36 Vernon Loggins, I Hear America ... Literature in the United States Since 1900 (New York: T. W. Crowell Co., 1937, p. 94.

How eerie are her lines in this poem!

WITCHES

Green eyes, gold hair, great beauty,
Have witches while they're girls,
Or dark eyes soft and sooty,
Bright lips and cloudy curls.

And from the poem "Nadir":

That we can close our lips on
poisonous
Dark wine diluted by the Stygean
wave.38

Benét is astonished and delighted with her queer figures of
speech as he shows:

In her poem called "The
Golden Heifer" the children
are led with a faun to the
Earthly Paradise. That a
pagan deity inhabiting an
animal should eventually lead
children, rendered wholly inno-
cent, into a Celtic and hence
Christian paradise, is not at
all astonishing in a poem by
Elinor Wylie.39

The farmer's humble daughter is made elegant as she
rides the heifer to lead her brothers to the land of plenty:

39 Ibid., p. VI.
Under the moon, a
Girl rode straddle
Proud as Una
In her lion-saddle;
Without a stirrup
And without a bridle;
White as Europe
In the Pagan idyll;
Crossing the valley
Like a silver-laden
Slave-drawn galley;
Brave as a maiden
Whom Caracalla had
Killed by leopards;
Strong as Galahad;
Safe as the shepherd's
Yeaning lamblet;
Wild as the lady
Loved by Hamlet;
Like a mermaid steady
On a milk-white charger,
With a sea-green trident --
Their mouths grew larger,
Their brown eyes widened
When their father's daughter
Between rows of poplar
Ran like water
But swifter, suppler, --
Sliding colder,
Brighter, briefer,
Riding the shoulder
Of the golden heifer.40

The reader should go with her through an entire
volume without stopping. Then, when the spell is broken and
he is once more one among the dreamless "polluted flock", he
can understand why in "Unfinished Portrait" she first
startles us with such figures as:

40 Wise, op. cit., p. 23.
A gold and silver trickery, infused
With blood of meteors, and moonstones
which
Are cold as eyeballs in a flooded
ditch.41

And then pleases us with a delicate quotation in the same
poem:

I do not glaze a lantern like a
shell
Inset with stars, nor make you
visible
Through jewelled arabesques which
adhere to clothe
The outline of your soul; I am
content
To leave you an uncaptured element;
Water, or light, or air that's
stained by both.42

At times as in "Atavism" she seeks to account for
her uncanny power. But the reader, too enchanted to bother
with causes, follows on. At each turn she shocks him with
a startling metaphor:

Perhaps she offers to buy
Francie's fingers, or warns Baba
to beware of plunging her wrists
too deep into the water of Chopin's
Nocturne, or declares that her
verse is a red carpet for Shelley.
Perhaps she describes a ghostly
supper in a Virginia mansion in

42 Loc. cit.
1866 or relates St. John's and St. Peter's bitter dreams of suffering on the gallows.43

"Oh, Francie, sell me your fingers
And I will pay you well!"

... . . . . . . . .
For your dinted knuckles
And blue printed wrist
I'll give you my buckle
Of paste and amethyst.44

Imagine a pianist plunging her hands into water to bring forth the beautiful music of Chopin! From the poem "Beware!":

Now she plunges both her wrists
Into the water blue as air,
Curdling into starry mists,
Diapered with light despair.45

The erratic effect produced by her startling images is discussed in the following manner: "Instinct with a sense of realism, her images at once shock and survive in the mind, and the motivation of them seldom errs through sensational emphasis."46

Mrs. Wylie dipped into many periods of history and

43 Loggins, op. cit., p. 94.
44 Black Armour, p. 69.
adventure for the inspiration of her writings. Zabel said:

    Folklore was the past she tried
to transfix; she also toyed with
late Renaissance romances, with
artificial epochs such as furnished
her with material for her novels,
and with the seventeenth century
metaphysical mysteries.47

From Greek folklore she gives us:

    TO APHRODITE, WITH A TALISMAN

This graven chain, that leads a
girl unkissed
From bridal-bed; that knows to
draw a man
Far over-seas; carved out of amethyst,
Chased with fine gold; accept,
O Cyprian:

See where it lies, translucent,
beautiful;
Oh, take it for your very own!
and see
How it is bound with violet-coloured
wool,
Gift of a sorceress from Thessaly.48

Her interest in Scotch balladry is substantiated
in her strikingly vivid "Firth of Forth". Her poem "Beltane"
is in the spirit of the Celtic celebration of May Day:

47 Loc. cit., p. 281.
48 Black Armour, p. 74.
BELTANE

Under oak, ash and thorn
My soul was born.
Under thorn, oak and ash
My body bent to the lash.
Under ash, thorn and oak
My heart broke.
Under oak, ash and thorn all three
I was nailed to a tree.\textsuperscript{49}

And again Zabel says:

\begin{quote}
With none \textsuperscript{[of her subjects]}
did she stay long enough to make them her own. Mrs. Wylie earnestly sued for exceptional dignity and even gave frequent promise of it. Superficially she was master of her technique; she brought it to yield all that she exacted of it.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

There are some who will feel that the writer of fantasy has an easier time than the realist, for when facts obstruct his tale, his imagination helps him to leap the hurdle; there are some who will not want to read this kind of writing, done by these escapists, where characters are vividly alive in spite of their remoteness from the world of reality; and for some the works of these three, James

\textsuperscript{49} Wise, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{50} Zabel, \textit{op. cit.} p. 281.
Branch Cabell, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Elinor Wylie will prove to be as, Olivier says, 'food for the gods with a flavor for the epicure's palate alone.'

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51 Wise, op. cit., p. XII
CHAPTER III

A CHRYSALIS UNFOLDS: ELINOR WYLIE EMERGES

"Elinor Wylie has always been conspicuous; that is her nature, but the most conspicuous act of her life was to emerge, with no period for fumbling or apparent preparation, full fledged."¹ Generally there can be found in the events of one's life, reasons for the attitudes formed concerning people, places, and things with which the individual comes in contact. While this in some measure is true, it is interesting to note the impression Elinor Wylie created which was quite contradictory to the life she was obliged to live.

She was not born of parents who knew financial struggle in their family, who were underprivileged themselves, who did not know the glamour of prominence, or who did not have a deep appreciation of the benefits their children would share as a result of close association with the fine, the cultural, the extraordinary things of life. Instead, she was born to a distinguished Pennsylvania family.

Her great grandfather had been a Mayor of Philadelphia, her

grandfather had been Governor of Pennsylvania, and her father was Solicitor General of United States under President Theodore Roosevelt.  

Elinor was born on September 7, 1885, at Somerville, New Jersey, to Anne and Henry Martin Hoyt. Besides her noted ancestors, she boasted a brother, Martin Hoyt, a painter of no little importance; and a sister, Nancy, a novelist to whom Elinor's inquirers are indebted for her book called, Elinor Wylie: the Portrait of an Unknown Lady.  

Because of her father's political aspirations, she spent much of her youth in Washington where she attended the Holton Arms School. Later she attended, in a suburb of Philadelphia, an exclusive girls' school where she studied art. From her twelfth birthday until she was twenty, she lived in Washington again where she made her début in the midst of the city's most prominent social élite. It was about this time in her life that there occurred an event from which she had more difficulty in escaping than from the literature of the realist which she gently, yet firmly, rejected.  

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At twenty, she married Philip Hichborn, by whom she had a son. The marriage proved unfortunate, and unable to secure a divorce, she deserted her baby and husband and eloped with Horace Wylie. Because she was not legally separated from Hichborn, she and Horace Wylie lived under an assumed name in England until 1915. Two reasons justified their return to America, one the suicidal death of Philip Hichborn, and the other, the anticipation of World War I.

With Wylie she lived in Boston, at Mount Desert, Maine, and in Georgia. While in England she anonymously published, in 1912, her first book of poems called Incidental Numbers. The success she experienced as a result of her publication inspired her into furthering her literary talents. She projected herself into groups interested and influential in literary circles. In 1919 she met William Rose Benét, who in 1923 became her husband.

Her second publication, Nets to Catch the Wind, brought her the Julia Ellsworth Ford prize awarded by the Poetry Society of America. Miss Sergeant said: "She had produced two volumes of poetry which placed her at once among the most sensitive, poignant, and accomplished writers of the day. . . ." In further praise of her work,

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3 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 36.
Kohler said: "Passion hides beneath the sharp austerity of her lines. Her poems speak with a living voice because poetry was her life and her passion." Of the influence most noted in the life and work of Elinor Wylie, an ardent admirer, Edith Olivier stated:

Poetically Elinor had two masters. The first was Shelley. She knew nearly all Shelley's poems by heart, and could always finish any line quoted. His intimates were hers: every piece of his recorded conversation was familiar to her.

Loggins says of the same influence:

She always had the time to collect Shellyana and during her summers in England and Italy to seek out the houses and spots which Shelley's presence had made more sacred to her.

Shelley fascination began when as a very young girl she discovered "The Cloud" and "The Skylark" in her Third Reader. At thirteen she read Trelawny's account of Shelley's last days and end. The details of the drowning

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5 Wise, op. cit., p. XII.

and the finding and cremating of the body on the seashore stirred within her a pity she had not known possible in humankind. From this time on, she was a Shelley student and worshipper. For two letters written by Shelley she paid £2,400. Loggins notes further the influence of Shelley upon Mrs. Wylie:

The whole of Shelley's life lay recorded before Elinor. She was soaked in it and it was with her always in the present. He was her life's strongest influence -- emotional, intellectual, artistic.  

Miss Deutsch recognized the second master under which Elinor Wylie was influenced. She wrote:

The fact that she employed the very vocabulary of Donne has been adduced to prove that she did not fully assimilate what she learned from him. But her frequent self-portraits, showing a woman of fanatical pride and invincible irony, seem to refute that charge. Certainly, he proved to be her master in the fervent nineteen sonnets she produced.  

Besides the influence of the masters upon Elinor, she proved herself talented and ambitious. Miss Olivier

7 Ibid., p. XII.  
8 Deutsch, op. cit., p. 166.
said: "Elinor Wylie was incurably scholarly, and throughout her life, she was as much student as poet."\textsuperscript{9} Her friend, Carl Van Doren described her as having "as sure and strong an intelligence as I have ever known." He also said of her:

No formal scholar, she had a scholar's instinct for exactness. Few people realize the extent of Elinor Wylie's learning. Her novels were often looked upon as mere flights of fancy, airy impossibilities floating in the clouds; while instead, her fantastic creations were flowers with roots reaching down into unguessed deeps of erudition.\textsuperscript{10}

She read widely for each of her four novels, which exist as the natural offspring of a mind saturated with the period described.

Kohler said: "She was a woman of extraordinary temperament who had known danger and despair and the iron discipline of experience, and she seemed to write with a strict need to reveal her tragic vision of life..."\textsuperscript{11} Cabell acknowledged her unusual ability in the following manner:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Olivier, \textit{op. cit.}, p. XI.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Van Doren \textit{op. cit.}, p. 340.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Kohler, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 218.
\end{itemize}
She who possessed the needed ability and an urgent need to use it, created therefore quite another sort of world, building amid desolation a baroque pagoda to be the sanctuary of wounded dreams and unfed desires. She created, in brief, a retreat wherein the rebuffed might encounter no more inglorious fiascos of the spirit and of the affections.12

Her loves, her aversions, and desires are stated but never dramatized; yet from the dark singing perfection of her lines the figure of their creator emerges.

Even her appearance was suggestive of the fragility for which her work was noted. Miss Olivier said:

Her face was heart-shaped and very white, and the copper-coloured hair curved nobly away from the sides of her forehead. Under the finely drawn eyebrows "her eyes were agate" like those of the Miranda of one of her most characteristic poems; and her hand... was white, like a hand seen under water.13

In a few words, Kohler classifies her personality and writing, one with the other.

Her personality was one of contradictions. She could be high-handed and remote and proud,

13 Wise, op. cit., p. IX.
but she was also comradely and mirthful and gracious, and her speech, like her writing, cracked with the wit and vigor of her mind. 14

She had the manner of one whom no disastrous circumstance could subdue. She could be tender to the underdogs and chivalrous to the unsuccessful. The sensitiveness which Elinor Wylie displayed in her writing is equally well displayed in her personality. Miss Olivier speaks intimately of Elinor in the following comment:

A chance word could make her deeply unhappy, and very often did. Elinor was an ardent patriot, being equally proud of her American citizenship and her English descent. She was quick to hear the least slur cast on one of her native lands by a citizen of the other, and she was always most American among the English and most English among the Americans. 15

She loved beauty; sought it; created it — in her surroundings as well as in her writing. While in Washington she took a room in University Place, furnished it elaborately with a silver mirror, fashionable drawing

14 Kohler, op. cit., p. 218.
15 Wise, op. cit., p. XII.
room chairs, old books in choice bindings, and other rare oddities. Particularly did she love the sheen, the elegance and reflection of silver. Whenever the occasion permitted, she dressed in silver, commanding the attention of ladies as well as gentlemen, as her sylph-like form glided here and there among her fashionable and prominent associates.

In Jennifer Lorn, one of her best novels, she justifies her possession of exquisite worldly goods through the action of Gerald who ordered every luxury for Jennifer:

"She shall have every luxury", Gerald assured them, "and what is harder come by in this infernal country, every comfort to boot. She shall have a dozen or more palanquin and a regiment of bearers; she shall have cool wines and dainty food and skilfully concocted febrifuges, wherein the taste of the cinchona bark is concealed among a multiplicity of flavorful spices, and the saps of trees join with delicious fruit juices to relieve the thirst of mid-day. She shall have a tent to sleep in, damasked with more fairy night-mares than filled the head of Scheherazade, and she shall ride one day on a great granite tower of elephant flesh and the next on a milk-white doe, according to her fancy and the exigencies of the weather."16

Miss Sergeant asks: "Was it life's enrichment or life's deprivation that tempted the pleasure-loving, the spoiled, the delicate, the brittle, the elusive Infanta, insolent and elfin as a child to escape into a world of her own?" Her uniqueness, Miss Olivier explains in this way: "She seemed born to find the rare thing, to see it from an oblique angle, at some quick, coloured moment, and then to paint it in words of a daring subtlety." There are those, notes a recent critic, "who simply cannot face life as it is. Their means and their methods of escape are many and varied, and sometimes strange." How fortunate that circumstances which encouraged Elinor Wylie to escape into a fragile world of imagination should combine with her talent of expression to present not many, but at least some works of literary merit.

17 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 37.
18 Wise, op. cit., p. IX.
CHAPTER IV

THE QUALITY OF THE WYLIE METHOD

Elinor Wylie's place of distinction in the literary world can hardly be denied when an investigation of her work is permitted. As poet, she sprang full grown with her first volume, Nets to Catch the Wind, published in 1921. A lyric voice, slight but clear and fine, may be heard in this book, the voice of a free and lightly ranging spirit. Hariett Monroe said of her writing:

The sound of it is now gay, now grave, but always it holds a little aloof -- one detects that something "austere, immaculate" for which the poet herself holds her Puritan ancestry responsible.

In the sonnet called "Wild Peaches", Mrs. Wylie exclaims:

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones
There's something in this richness
that I hate.

Occasionally she is meditative, or descriptive, or, as in

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"Valentine", self-searching. Her emotion is always expressed in a shy and delicate manner described by Miss Monroe, "as of a cool small wild flower growing by some whim of Nature, not in the woods, but in the protected area of a garden." 3

In a number of her poems, she carefully admonishes, as in "The Eagle and the Mole" or as in the "Madman's Song". Miss Monroe's choice of Elinor Wylie's poems is stated thus: "'The Eagle and the Mole', urging toward the high or the profound as against a safe 'middle of the road' policy, is perhaps the most temptingly quotable poem in the book." 4

Gorman emphasizes the mysticism of Mrs. Wylie's work:

In her lyrics the unexpressed word is the important word, as in all lyrics intended to be beautiful. In a poem of twenty lines concerning pearls, the word is never used. Such obscurity is further produced in a profusion of far-fetched images, as in the highly metaphysical "Doomsday".

3 Monroe, op. cit., p. 220.
4 Ibid., p. 221.
But the chief obscurity of her finest poems arises from her mysticism. More than any woman of this generation she may claim to be a spiritual daughter of Donne.  

The mysticism she enjoyed is present in the poem called "Fable".

**FABLE**

A knight lay dead in Senlac:
One white raven stood
Where his breast-bone showed a crack:
She dipped her beak in blood.

The old man's lean and carven head
Was severed under the chin:
The raven's beak was varnished red
Where the veins ran small and thin.

Empty sockets sucked the light
Where the great gold eyes had shone;
Oh, but the raven's eyes were bright
With fire she supped upon!

The old man's beard was ravelled up
In stiff and webby skeins;
From his broad skull's broken cup
The raven sipped his brains.

Insensate with that burning draught
Her feathers turned to flame:
Like a cruel silver shaft
Across the sun she came.

---

She flew straight into God's house;  
She drank the virtuous air.  
A knight lay dead: his gutted brows  
Gaped hollow under his hair.⁶

Mrs. Wylie's reference to God's house suggests that the white raven, representing one strayed from God, tasted again of the blood of religion and was redeemed. The raven first sips, then drinks fully of "the virtuous air". Henry W. Wells recognizes, too, the injection of mysticism in the literature of the day:

That our age of stress, strain, and ingenious self-torment has turned back to Donne, revolting from Victorian sentiment as he revolted from Petrarchistic sentiment, is well recognized as an important episode in literary history.⁷

It is well that such a gifted poet as Elinor Wylie should fall under the spell of John Donne. She read a great deal of his poetry. Miss Olivier states: "She revelled, as he did, in the Festivals and Pentecosts of Metaphysics. She liked Donne's packed style, his curious


metaphors, his bold paradoxes." He choice of subjects were ones he had chosen and her handling of ideas was often oddly like his. That she had so much of Donne's temperament helped her in following in his path. Her poetry, like his, combines intellectual subtlety and emotional directness.

SONNET XI

"Before I die, let me be happy here."
The glass of heaven was split, and by that token
i knew the bubble of my heart had broken;
The cool and chaste, the iridescent sphere,
Filled, in that vernal season of the year
with sapling's blood, the beechen and the oaken
And the green willow's; when the word was spoken
This innocence did faint and disappear. 9

And from "Felo de Se"

Heart of my heart, the heart alone has courage
Thus to relinquish; it is yourself that stils you
In all my pulses, and dissolves the marriage

8 Wise, op. cit., p. AII.

Of soul and soul, and at the heart's core kills you.10

In the poem "Full Moon", she says:

There I walked, and there I raged;
The spiritual savage caged
Within my skeleton, raged afresh
To feel, behind a carnal mesh,
The clean bones crying in the flesh.11

Emotional poetry reveals the poet's reactions and responses to the visible world and the world of ideas. This type of expression in Mrs. Wylie's work is observed by Gorman:

A dark emotionalism is implicit in these poems by Mrs. Wylie, which I may safely assert are only secondarily experiments in design. However, her best work withholds an emotionalism that filters through the mind and yet retains its disturbing substance. It is secretive, this emotionalism, but nevertheless profound. Mrs. "ylie's emotional processes might be described as cerebral in the sense that Dr. John Donne was cerebral.12

10 Ibid., p. 28.
11 Black Armour, p. 12.
Elinor Wylie's reactions toward life were emotional; yet, at the same time, she explored deeply into the subterranean strata below surface consciousness.

The lyric qualities of Elinor Wylie's poetry are pointed out by Wells:

Repeatedly inner strife appears her formula for lyric art. Her famous "Birthday Sonnet" represents her fierce struggle to retain her integrity. Three of her best known poems continue this theme. In one, she records the struggle between "a private madness" and "this virtuous light."

O VIRTUOUS LIGHT

A private madness has prevailed
Over the pure and valiant mind;
The instrument of reason failed
And the star-gazing eyes struck blind.14

Another is a debate between three aspects of her nature, heart, mind, and soul -- regarding a fourth, her querulous body."15

13 Wells, op. cit., p. 250.
14 Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 29.
15 Wells, op. cit., p. 250.
THIS CORRUPTIBLE

Then did that fellowship
Of three, the Body strip;
Beheld his wounds, and none
among them mortal;
The Mind severe and cool;
The Heart still half a fool;
The fine-spun Soul, a beam of
sun can startle.16

Wells comments on the struggle in her mind:

More than once she considers
the relative claims of a fastid­ious beauty and "the savage lovely"
renouncing her earlier allegiance
to the former. Again and again she
traces her inner struggles; some­
times the battle seems over, some­
times it looms in the future.17

Gorman does not believe intellectual poetry to be
the kind of poetry for which Mrs. Wylie will be remembered.

He says:

Intellectual poetry expresses the
poet's explorations and discoveries
in the visible world and the world of
ideas.

Intelect in poetry presupposes
a concentration of cerebral ardour
that generally results in lapidary
methods. The meticulous shaping of
thought and the resistless explora­
tion of its ramifications are its
natural corollaries. Elinor Wylie

16 Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 35.
17 Wells, op. cit., p. 250.
has been termed a lapidary of poetry, but by writers who vaguely understood their own meaning.18

However, Mrs. Wylie's opinion of herself is contrary to that of Gorman. Her intellectual tendencies are self-confessed. It is the moral of one of her lyrics that wisdom is greater than love or pity. While her deeply introverted personality rejected affection and overt enthusiasm, her artistry was like a sword, intricately carved, magnificently polished, and terribly effective.

Millett finds intelligence as well as beauty in her work:

The world she lived in was not the familiar world of domestic poetry, it was the black and white world of snow and ice, metallic and gleaming. But within the sheath of ice, there was a core of strange fire and passion, emotion and intelligence were fused in highly concentrated and exquisitely finished poetry.19

In Mrs. Wylie's desire to escape she writes:

18 Gorman, op. cit., p. 679.
19 Millett, op. cit., p. 146.
FAR AWAY

Now stars burn out to ashes 
and lawns are spread with lace 
and morning lifts her lashes 
to look upon your face.

Now trees are silver tasselled 
and clouds are water-spun 
and I rise up undazzled 
Who only see the sun.20

Gorman here acknowledges a kind of intellect in 
her work:

For her, the beautiful 
body of thought is far beyond 
mere bodily beauty. There is, 
as a result, a delicate sex-
lessness in her work which is 
not due to "the Puritan marrow" 
in her bones, but rather to an 
intellect so refined in other 
directions that bodily im-
pulses are but the detached 
insufficiencies of weaker minds.21

In the poem "South", Mrs. Wylie's intellectual 
appreciation of Nature is apparent:

SOUTH

Spotted by sun, and visible 
Above me in a wave-green vault, 
With that thick sticky linden-smell

20 Jane Wise, Last Poems of Elinor Wylie 

21 Gorman, op. cit., p. 683.
Saturate, as the sea with salt.

Transmuting all the blue to green
And all the green to serpent's tongues,
Deep, ponderable, felt and seen,
And breathed in pain, with heavy lungs.

Is this that limber element
which runs like light, and will not stop
To drink the apple's sap and scent
While thirsting for the mountain-top? 22

To look upon herself, to judge her solution of the day's problems and the means by which she solved them -- these are part of the rare perogative which her controlled intellect gives her.

Mary Colum, in her memorial to Elinor Wylie, places Mrs. Wylie's intellect on a higher plane than that of mortal man.

Elinor Wylie's intellectual kinship was with those metaphysical and visionary women saints like Theresa, and Catherine, and Hildegarde, who were given to contemplation and a profound interior life. Like some other contemporary poets, notably like Yeats and T. S. Eliot, she seemed one who would have been very at home.

22 Black Armour, p. 45.
in a convent or monastery of one of the contemplative orders, with leisure for reverie and meditation and study, and for evolving some explanation of life and the soul.23

In "Desolation Is a Delicate Thing", Elinor Whylie wonders at her rapid changes from grief to ease, while in "A Proud Lady", she depicts a woman after her own heart, scorning the world without losing temper. In "Minotaur" -- a profound piece of psychology which should be read painstakingly by fastidious people -- she presents in crystallized form the great problem of over-refinement in both art and life. Her magnificent poem, "O Virtuous Light" is a debate between the halves of her tense personality.

Again a reflection of Donne is found by Wells: "Self-Portrait" might, with the omission of a single redundant syllable serve even better as a picture of Donne than of herself.24


24 Wells, op. cit., p. 249.
SELF PORTRAIT

A lens of crystal whose transparency calms
Queer stars to clarity, and
disentangles
Fox-fires to form austere refracted angles:
A texture polished on the horny palms
Of vast equivocal creatures,
beast or human:
A flint, a substance finer-grained
than snow,
Graved with the graces in intaglio
To set sarcastic sigil on the woman.

This for the mind, and for the little rest
A hollow scooped to blackness in the breast,
The simulacrum of a cloud, a feather:
Instead of stone, instead of scultured strength,
This soul, this vanity, blown hither and thither
By trivial breath, over the whole world's length. 25

Wells places this one of her poems in the style of the seventeenth century writers: "Her poem, 'This Corruptible', is a traditional debate in the seventeenth century manner between Heart, Mind, and Spirit."26

Two volumes of poetry following Nets to Catch the Wind (1921), while maintaining her high level of distinction,

25 Black Armour, p. 41.
26 Wells, op. cit., p. 149.
fail to surpass it; one, *Black Armour* (1923), and the other *Trivial Breath* (1929). Also in 1929 there was published her last and posthumous volume of poetry *Angels and Earthly Creatures* which is probably superior to any of the others because of its sonnet sequence entitled, "One Person". Of the use of the sonnet form, Wells said: "She found the discipline of the sonnet an aid not a barrier in the expression of her passionate integrity -- to her a sonnet was less a poem than a flash of lightning."27

Miss Olivier says in praise of her sonnets:

... nothing could be more sophisticated than the first of the "Subversive Sonnets", nothing more disillusioned than the second, and yet the third attains an almost Shakespearean expression of wisdom.28

SONNET III

"Children and dogs are subject to my power,"
You said, and smiled, and I beside you smiled,
Perceiving my unwisdom of a child,
My courage of a wolf new-taught to cower:
Upon the grass, beneath the falling flower,
I saw my spirit silent and beguiled


28 *Wise, op. cit.*, p. VII.
Standing at gaze; a brute no longer wild;
An infant wearied by the difficult hour.

And am I not your child who has come home?
And am I not your hound for faithfulness?
Put forth your hand, put forth your hand to bless
A creature stricken timorous and dumb,
Who now regards you with a lover's eyes
And knows that you are merciful and wise.29

One may ponder the exquisite simplicity of "With a Blue Honey Jar" and contrast it with the bitter reality of "From the Wall". Despite the original and highly effective rhymes, the poet gives just the necessary minimum of attention to the division between octave and sestet.

Loggins agrees with Miss Olivier concerning Mrs. Wylie's sonnets:

"One Person" has been compared with all the great sonnet sequences. In spirit and in art it is closer to Shakespear than to any other. But it is in no sense Shakespearean. It is as individual as Elinor Wylie herself was -- as lovely, as child-

29 Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 5.
like, as exquisite, and as rare.

SONNET XI

"Before I die, let me be happy here." The glass of heaven was split, and by that token I knew the bubble of my heart had broken; The cool and chaste, the iridescent sphere, Filled, in that vernal season of the year, with sapling's blood, the beechen and the oaken And the green willow's; when the word was spoken This innocence did faint and disappear.

So have I lost my only wedding dower, The veins of spring, enclosed within my heart, traced small in silver like a celestial chart; And I am vanished in the leaf and flower, since, at your voice, my body's core and pith Dissolves in air, and is destroyed forthwith.

Certainly this is Elinor Wylie indicating a desire for happiness before death overtakes her. Even at this early age, there appeared this premonition of death to which

30 Loggins, op. cit., p. 96.
31 Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 13.
she so constantly referred. "The iridescent sphere", the mention of "silver", the enumeration of the trees, "the beechen and the oaken and the green willows" and the quick dissolution of the body after death are further manifestations of Elinor Wylie expression. These sonnets are different from the rest of her work and should always be judged apart. Her last sonnet, "Birthday sonnet", composed most fittingly the day before her death, offers further support to her alliance with the mystic and metaphysical tradition.

Wells considers Mrs. Wylie a writer of courage and ability for achieving distinction as a contributor to Cavalier tradition: "Of the many women who have pursued the genius of Cavalier poetry, none has achieved higher recognition than Elinor Wylie, who had both the wisdom to learn and the genius to create."32 The Cavalier poets delighted in terse lines and terse stanzas. In both of these, Elinor Wylie excels. The remarkable invention she displays in the meter of "Peregrine" and "The Golden Heifer" is her contribution to Cavalier tradition.

In these last eight lines of "Peregrine" the meter is distinctly different:

32 Wells, op. cit., p. 158.
The noose draws tighter;
I've played the traitor over and over.
I'm good at rhyming,
like seven and twenty,
sixteen and twenty,
even rhyming, rhyming.

Jessica North finds pleasure in Mrs. Wylie's
ability to rhyme lines:
her rhymes seem almost,
to come out of the conjuror's
hat. Ability to find rhyme for
every line ending, no matter
how unrhymable: circe and hearsey,
seate, picon and religion, legate and
moreover she makes the meaning
of the line come around naturally

The meter, although not consistent, is unique. The dominant
foot being a short, long, short. In "The Golden Fleece" too,
to the rhyming word with no strained effect.35

From her poem "Gifts at Meeting", come these lines which display her ability to rhyme words:

Cups of lapis
And mirrors of bronze;
Springes, to trap us
Geese and swans;36

Hariett Monroe is delighted, too, with Elinor Wylie's rhymes:

The swift steps of the measure in "Miranda's Supper" accept happily that intricate play of highly original rhymes in which she delighted, tosses them like a juggler his balls, and catches them dangerously at the end of a line as they seem to escape her handling. They are clever, witty, miraculously effective; but more than that, they are robust, muscular -- they carry the light texture of these poems with authority and power.37

The value of each word she used was weighed most minutely by Elinor Wylie. Babette Deutsch compares her concern for words with her desire for rich worldly goods:

36 Black Armour, p. 73.
37 Monroe, op. cit., pp. 269-270.
Words, their grain and color, their shape and weight, the careful balance of vowels, the nice consideration of consonants, were her particular concern. She cherished other man-made things; rich stuffs, fine china, tooled volumes, gardens, jewels. She seemed to love her nouns and adjectives as she did these armaments and amenities -- for the decorative element in them and for whatever reminders they could offer of a sumptuous and gracious life.38

Mrs. Wylie's style seldom fails to offer the delight of a scrupulously carven and polished intaglio. In Gorman's article on Mrs. Wylie, is found this appreciation of the significant words she chose:

Although the verbal designs are similar to the enchanted imbroglios in starry crystals on window-panes, there is no truth in the superficial assumption that if the design be scraped away there will be nothing left but the darkness and nothingness of the night without.39

In her poem "October", the richness and depth of colors is

38 Deutsch, op. cit., p. 165.

carried entirely through.

OCTOBER

Beauty has a tarnished dress, and a patchwork cloak of cloth dipped deep in mournfulness, striped like a moth.

Wet grass where it trails
Dyes it green along the hem
She has seven silver veils
With crackled bells on them.

She is tired of all these --
Gray gauze, translucent lawn;
The broad cloak of Herakles
Is tangled flame and fawn.

Water and light are wearing thin:
She has drawn above her head
The warm enormous lion skin
Rough gold and red. 40

Though at times she was a little prettily rococo, at her best she was a distinguished exemplar of the modern poetic baroque. Some of her most graceful verse remains to this day only in the newspapers and periodicals to which she contributed; it was gathered neither into the four volumes of poetry published during her life time nor into the beautiful posthumous *Collected Poems*.

In her novels, romance dominates but does not monopolize. She could be intellectual, erudite, and satiric

40 Wise, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
as well as extravagantly imaginative. Her sense of tragedy led her to such beflowered and beribboned refuges as Jennifer Lorn, The Venetian Glass Nephew, Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard, and later The Orphan Angel.

Beauty of language; lavishness; appeals to the senses, not only of sight and sound but feeling as well; intricate patterns woven with colors and textures; exactness of detail—all of these Mrs. Wylie presents in a single novel, her first, probably her best, Jennifer Lorn.

The feeling of revolting heat is present here:

The hot season she could never for an instant have supported; regarding all extremities of heat and cold with an equal repugnance, she had never scrupled to faint in Church upon a sultry Sunday in August if the family's departure for Carterbaugh was postponed by any mischance. . . .

Colors she painted in this passage are:

Enveloped in a faun-colored cloak of heavy Chinese silk, with his pale face burned by the sun to the exact shade of a delicately toasted biscuit, and his yellow hair bleached by the same powerful

---

agency to approximately a like tint, he was a curious and commanding figure, the incarnation of some ivory idol of remote antiquity.42

Such imagery, such fragile touches, such dainty porcelain-like artifices are words of a masterpiece of its kind:

The crescent plume that lit the deepening sky floated softly down until it hung among the heavy headed roses; the ground absorbed its unsubstantiality like rain. The night was dark, yet trees and flowers were translucent as black glass to the starlight; they glittered like black glass.43

Fragility is partially accomplished through fineness of detail. Few writers can surpass the patience with which Mrs. Wylie describes people or things. In Jennifer Lorn the abbas is presented thus:

He was clothed in a shirt of fine cotton cloth, lavishly embroidered at the throat with minute flowers in threads of white and gold; his loose trousers, of the same material, terminated in narrow slippers of thin grass green morrocco; the extreme slender-

42 Ibid., p. 174.
43 Ibid., p. 220.
ness of his waist was defined by a broad black belt of varnished leather, the clasp of which was a solid mass of magnificent emerald. His garments were like snow; his whole person breathed of clean linen and rose-water; his neatness was superlative. A short tunic, patterned like a Cashmere shawl in black and violet and green was flung upon the trampled rose-leaves at his feet. The crown of his head was shaved; above his ears the dark hair was drawn forward into two love-locks which encroached upon the smooth pallor of his cheeks. . . . The faintest possible penciling of down sketched a tentative line along his upper lip; his eyebrows were traced in scarcely visible curves. His features were delicate; what they lacked in decisive chiseling was more than atoned for by the perfection of their finish. His long brown eyes might have belonged to a little brother of the Semiaris; his finger nails were filed into sharp points.44

In the opinion of Carl Van Doren: "The novels of Elinor Wylie, better known for her poems, are unsurpassed in modern literature for precise elegance, amused formality of language structure, and ideas."45 Elinor wylie's sister

44 Ibid., p. 193.
45 Van Doren, op. cit., p. 327.
admits that: "She had turned to fiction partly to earn more
money, indeed largely for that reason..."46

She began with Jennifer Lorn (1923), one of the
most precocious first novels ever written. It is a tale set
in Warren Hastings's England and India -- the Britain of
Shelley's father and grandfather. Loggins said of it: "It
is an ironic picture of social folly such as Shelley him­
self might have drawn if humor and gaiety had been added to
his store of gifts."47 Just as there is no love in any of
her stories, there is no feeling, and little humanity in
this.

She herself called Jennifer Lorn "a sedate
extravaganza". A reflection of her intellect is found in
it by Van Doren: She laid the action in the eighteenth
century not only because she knew the age so well, but also
because its stiff manners and flexible intellect was de­
lightful to her own temper."48 Exquisitely picturesque,
the book has never a false note, never is there a trace
of reality in the whole elaborate concoction -- probably
the best example of her delicate and fragile escape.

46 Nancy Hoyt, Elinor Wylie: The Portrait of an
47 Loggins, op. cit., p. 95.
48 Van Doren, op. cit., p. 327.
Hariett Monroe describes it thus: "... its puppets move with precise grace through a delicately patterned satire of the human comedy as their manager pulls the intricate strings."49

From these excerpts we get the fine detail and exquisitiveness of texture and color:

"At last I have found you," he repeated, in accents rendered thrilling by the little vibration in his voice, compounded equally of laughter and emotion. "I saw you first in a Hackney coach in London, last October... I do not recall what you were wearing at the time, but I know that you appeared to me as a seraph robed in snow --" 

"That must have been my ermine mantle --"

"And again in the gardens of the Tuileries; night was falling; you seemed a star in the darkness --"

"And that was my black velvet pelisse, without doubt," cried Jennifer with warm interest.50

Again there is great beauty as these colors reveal themselves, yet there is a greater sense of strength in these

49 Monroe, op. cit., p. 269.

As the travelers passed through the parched and arid suburbs of Delhi, Jennifer perceived in the distance a noble building of rose-colored sandstone inlaid with white marble; it stood in a terraced garden, the whole surrounded by an embattled wall, with watch towers and four defensible gates. Farther away, crimson against the azure sky of waning afternoon, a monumental column out-topped all visible erections, its gigantic plinth was a polygon of twenty sides.\footnote{51}

Her sister, Nancy Hoyt, proudly points to her accomplishments: "She met so many people who became her great friends through \textit{Jennifer} -- Emily Clark and Mr. Cabell and lots of others."\footnote{52}

Cabell was delighted at being a reviewer of her first novel:

\begin{quote}
For I had the good luck to rank along with Sinclair Lewis and Carl Van Doren, as one of the "discoverers" of \textit{Jennifer Lorn} in the autumn of 1923 and to
\end{quote}

\footnote{51}{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 177.}

\footnote{52}{\textit{Hoyt, op. cit.}, p. 84.}
commend this story in the public prints (according to the testimony in my scrap books) as "compact of color and legerity and glitter". 53

Burdett said of it: "... the jewelled style, which carries the reader as in an ornate palanquin, never falters." 54

Gorman sums up his opinion of Jennifer Lorn in the following manner:

In spite of the many laudatory encomiums which her novel, Jennifer Lorn, has aroused, I consider it less a development and emphatic progression than a strangely complete reiteration of a unique mentality, a decoration and embroidery in fantastic and semi-barbaric colors of that astonishing individuality that has been for long suspected in her work. ... it furnishes her readers a definite proof of her clear mentality, her unmuddied thinking, her meticulous craftsmanship. From an unknown writer the book would have been a great achievement, from Mrs. Wylie it is but an unexpected strengthening of her position. It is evidence that she can build better than any American

53 Cabell, op. cit., p. 335.
54 Burdett, op. cit., p. 489.
woman of her generation, that she can carry through to a deft ironic conclusion an ex­tended effort, that she can command an apparently effort­less consistency, that in technique and instinctive feeling and intellect she might circumscribe a great theme. 55

The second novel, too, The Venetian Glass Nephew (1925), gave evidence of her love of her idol, Shelley. This story is on a favorite Shelleyan problem, the conflict between Nature and Art -- the conflict, which in its broad­est aspects, determined largely the speculative thought of Shelley's age. Loggins believed her love of Shelley was deeper than any love for mortal man:

She loved Shelley with a steadfast passion which she never felt for mortal man. His conception of beauty as intellectual, as detached from the material, as belonging to the realm of the Platonic ideal was her conception. The Shelley whom she adored was the Shelley who playfully identified him­self with the cloud, the skylark, and the wild west wind -- the Shelley who shrieked and clasped his hands in ecstasy and vowed eternal devotion when once the

vision of beauty stood unveiled in his mind.\textsuperscript{56}

In \textit{The Venetian Glass Nephew}, which Mrs. Wylie called a moral fairy tale, the conflict between art and nature is finally concluded with nature yielding to art. The hero of the story, Virginio, has been made out of glass to satisfy the desire of the cardinal who has no nephew but wants for one. Through magic and sorcery, life is breathed into the glass figure. The tragedy occurs when Virginio falls in love with a real flesh and blood young lady, Rosalba. The marriage of the two proves a failure until Rosalba agrees to be placed into a furnace where she, too, can be made into porcelain. At last, she is the right bride for Virginio. Van Doren does not claim originality for Mrs. Wylie in this plot, but her handling of the situation was unique; "Such a conflict has been dealt with by many story tellers, but Elinor Wylie's way was to make it into a fairy tale and to bring it to the ironical oblique solution."\textsuperscript{57} Cabell refers to Mrs. Wylie's development of the idea as "pure and hurtless white magic":

\textsuperscript{56} Loggins, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 90

\textsuperscript{57} Van Doren, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 328.
For not only Rosalba and Virginio, but all the other inhabitants likewise, I take to be handsome porcelain figures animated by a pure and hurtless white magic. They have been shaped and colored with a pleasingly faded elegance. They have been given life, but there is no more blood in them than there is grossness. They enact their well-bred comedy which includes a toy misery or so. It touches now and then the exaltedly tragic as if with a caress.58

The exceptional presentation of tiny porcelain figures speaking to each other in delicate tones with fragile tongues makes us know that this is but a make-believe land, where not lust, nor death, nor poverty, nor bankrupt love, but the joys of virtuousness, and of finesse, and of each tiny triumph in phrase making, are the only serious matters.

In her second novel, Elinor Wylie felt she had to prove, to her exacting self even more than to others, that Jennifer Lorn had not been an accident. She must repeat the triumph to justify her turn from verse to poetry; she must make it plain that she was a novelist as well as poet.59

58 Cabell, op. cit., p. 341.

That Elinor Wylie was a better writer when she wrote *The Venetian Glass Nephew* is partly proved by the fact that the sound of weeping is more audible in this novel than in *Jennifer Lorn*. Mr. Cabell in his praise of *The Venetian Glass Nephew* says: "To my mind all conceivable exploits in the way of fantastic romance then seemed to lie well within the compass of this woman's refined and impeccable ability."60

The dramatization of *The Venetian Glass Nephew* amazed Broadway, as is shown in a review of the play made by Ruth Hale. Said Miss Hale:

> It is all quite remote from anything Broadway is accustomed to appraising, very eighteenth century, thoroughly fantastic, a bit murky in some of its implications, fragile, dainty, and replete with possibilities unrealized in the present production. The story itself is a strange admixture of hazy theology, black and white magic, wit and cynicism of the Voltaire variety, and the brittle charm of figurines moving to melodies of the harp and strings... . . .

> Underlying theme is curiously discolored with forces that strike at the source of creation. For all its fragile fantasy, it

is the theme once again of "The Golem" and of "Frankenstein", but with this difference, that the major epics of black magic, including the various versions of the Faust legend, portray the efforts to interfere with life and the soul as almost cosmic tragedies, whereas the present tale smooths over the vast implication of its theme with the lightness of a fairy tale, and even lends to the last transformation the glamour of a poetic romance.61

And in the opinion of Mr. Cabell:

These two books, Jennifer Lorn and The Venetian Glass Nephew I regard, I admit as something very like masterpieces in their own sharply limited field. That field is not large nor is it especially lofty. Yet it now and then repays the thorny soil of bemused gardeners very prettily with frail blossoms.62

Mr. Loggins made a relevant comment on her third novel:

The hero of the best of her novels, The Orphan Angel (1926) is Shelley himself —


62 Cabell, op. cit., p. 338.
Shelley shorn of his past, even of his real name. According to the story he was not drowned when his boat was wrecked in the Bay of Spezzia in 1822, but was rescued by a Yankee freighter and brought to Boston. The book is a Shellyan odyssey—not among the islands of the abstract, like Alastor—but among the rivers, plains, mountains, pioneers, savages, and backwoods philosophy of the American West of the 1820's. Adventure into the picturesque, a sound social study, and poetic romance of the finest type, The Orphan Angel alone should keep Elinor Wylie's name alive. 63

If she ridiculed the hero of The Orphan Angel—called Mortal Image in England—she did it gently, as "Shiloh" was another name for Shelley, and she loved Shelley with too deep a devotion to hurt even his spirit. To honor him by writing a carefully made book, she made herself familiar with the roads and rivers, the mountains and prairies. She studied the year 1822 in America as if it were her house to which Shelley was to go. Her account of Shelley's mind and character is the most perceptive ever written.

63 Loggins, op. cit., p. 95.
Julia Cluck concludes with her opinion of Mrs. Wylie's Shelley obsession: "She had given expression to the idea, . . . that she was a reincarnated Shelley, and here at last she had the opportunity to effect a fusion of the two personalities."64

The explanation of having one title for the book in America and another in England is that at the time the book was published, there appeared on the market a book by Willa Cather which had in its title the word "Mortal". In order to avoid confusion Mrs. Wylie was persuaded by her literary friends to use the title, The Orphan Angel in America and Mortal Image for the English edition.

Nancy Hoyt evaluates her sister's success in terms of dollars:

The Orphan Angel was taken by the Book of the Month Club, and many thousand other copies were sold by the publishers. Elinor made about eight thousand dollars in one lump from this long, romantic, old-fashioned tale of adventure. She was deeply surprised and held her breath until she could really believe it to be true. There was money in her bank account, and all over America in fifty thousand rooms the book was

lying on the table under the reading lamp. This was achievement on a big scale. 65

Mr. James Branch Cabell, to whom Nancy Hoyt refers as one of Elinor's friends, newly acquired as a result of Jennifer Lorn, certainly did not react in a very friendly manner when he declared The Orphan Angel "a most inane wasting of wood pulp even for the Book of the Month Club to be inflicting upon its broken spirited customers." 66

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant concedes a point to The Orphan Angel:

Whether the reader feels as some critics, that this third novel by Elinor Wylie was a fortifying of her position in the literary world or whether he agrees with Mr. Cabell that this was a gloomy error in literary history, he must acknowledge that there is more warmth in The Orphan Angel than in earlier books, but it is still the warmth of a cold stream in the sparkle of noon. 67

The last book of fiction Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard (1928) is on an England without Shelley -- the 1833 materialistic England, which did not know the romantics. Yet

65 Hoyt, op. cit., p. 124.
67 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 38.
Mr. Hodge comes back to England as Shelley might have come had he lived, and Mr. Hazard is Llinor Wylie returned to England after ten year's absence. Amusing is the talk of by-gone days -- the books of the moment, the newspaper, the gossip, all meticulously correct. The book, Mrs. Wylie said, was "an everyday fable; its historical trappings are slight and it must remain not a disguised biography but a brief symbolic romance of the mind."68

It is Van Doren's opinion that: "It is simply a clash between a man of imagination like Hazard and a heavy-witted man like Hodge."69 Nancy Hoyt says of it:

It is a limpidly lovely, painfully burning book, entirely about England (and influenza and Shelley and her own 'flu wrecked self), but it was largely written during a crisp, cold autumn in early winter in Ninth Street.70

Mrs. Wylie's description of a rain storm produces a feeling of necessity and welcome to the damaging water:

68 Hoyt, op. cit., 148.
69 Van Doren, op. cit., p. 329.
70 Hoyt, op. cit., p. 151.
The clear green sky was darkened by a slanting tidal of rain; the rain beat wildly at the windows, and Mr. Hazard opened both the windows and let the rain drive in, along the dusty carpet, along the tops of the tables, with a prodigious sound of blown foolscap paper and the fluttering open leaves of books. 71

And still another description of rain:

The days began with showers, shot through and through with points of waking light. The colours were a rainbow's but the shapes of clouds lacked the calm symmetry of a rainbow's arch; the wind and the wilder bursts of rain drove them hither and thither across the sky. Unquiet sparks of ecstasy, smaller than the sun's reflection in a drop of rain, lit the capricious twilight of Mr. Hazard's thoughts. The influenza had blown upon the mirror of his mind and misted it with a sorrowful fog; now the unquiet sparks of ecstasy moved over his mind and scoured it to brightness. 72

That Elinor Wylie still possessed her ability to

71 Elinor Wylie, Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 76.
72 Ibid., p. 50.
give to her writing that fragile touch which so distinguished her from other writers is seen in still another passage from Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard:

The candle flared into a small pillar of fire and died in the wind, but there remained enough pale and aqueous light within the room to permit Mr. Hazard to throw his books into the boxes, among a tangle of luminous white shirts and attenuated black trousers. 73

Not too much recognition is given to her last novel, Osbert Burdett calling it "a weaker epilogue to The Orphan Angel," and no mention whatever is made of it in an obituary in the London Mercury for January, 1929, wherein appeared Mrs. Wylie's death notice. However, James Hart gives credit to all four of her novels: "Her four novels are distinguished by a highly manner craftsmanship and a juxtaposition of artificial formality and fantasy like that of her verse." 74

Allan Tate in evaluating her work says of Mrs. Wylie:

... it is hard to select the best of it because from first to last, her technical

73 Ibid., p. 77.

competence permitted her to absorb so many of the literary and moral influences of her time. And I think this same technical mastery kept her, at moments, from ever quite knowing what was her own impulse and what she assimilated. 75

He states further:

It is this feature of her work that explains her brilliant moments and in the end her lack of style; style that is eveness of tone, and permanence of reference for all perceptions which comes from a mind that, though it may avoid fixed opinions, has nevertheless a single way of taking hold of its material. and this Mrs. wylie never had. 76

What Elizabeth Drew says here of her poetry may also be said of her prose:

It is quite possible, of course, that the poet's technical achievements may be sure but slight. Many minor poets achieve a reputation in their own day above their real merit because of their firm hold on a pleasing technique quite adequate to any content they

76 Ibid., p. 107.
may have to express. Their voices may be of small compass, but they have been well trained. Elinor Wylie was a poet of this caliber.77

At the end of her short writing career, she ceased to be a sorceress weaving wonder in words. She became instead a mere woman, drunk with a new love which she called "This Miracle". In the light of brevity, all her previous aspirations assumed unimportance. Loggins suggests that Elinor Wylie knew that life was to be a short experience: "Again she feels -- more keenly than when she set out to prove herself a worthy disciple of Shelley: -- the brevity of life."78

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78 Loggins, op. cit., p. 96.
CHAPTER V
ELINOR WYLIE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE
FIELD OF LITERATURE

The intervention of a war during a period of a writer's work obviously influences the subject, style, and attitudes presented in that writing. So it was with Elinor Wylie; she wrote during and, more profusely, after World War I. Fundamentally, there was an attempt by writers such as Cabell, Hergesheimer, and Mrs. Wylie to compensate for the trite and insignificant phases of American life by creating a literature that was aristocratic, carefully mannered, and capable of propelling the imagination to newly created worlds.

These writers "wrote stories or essays that were bejeweled and very often bewildering, but the impulse behind much of their work was simple, homely, even patriotic."\(^1\) Their chief purpose was to prove that American writers were capable of producing a kind of literature distinctly apart from the work-a-day world in which they lived. They hoped, too, to prove that the American reading public would be

enthusiastic in accepting their creations. That Americans were willing to show enthusiasm and to eagerly accept the literature of "the sophisticates" was evidenced by the popularity of some of each of their writings: Jennifer Lorn for Mrs. Wylie; Jurgen, whose popularity was probably due to its suppression, for Cabell, and Three Black Pennys for Hergesheimer.

The success Mrs. Wylie's Jennifer Lorn would experience today is very much doubted. While it still contributes its passages of fragile and subtle beauty, it is difficult to stay with it as one does with a novel which has a more modern background and more natural people for its characters, to say nothing of a more active and swiftly moving plot. In Jennifer Lorn, it is impossible for any of the furnishings, characters, emotions, attitudes, or epigrams to behave naturally for one moment. They were not meant to be life; they represent art. The gilded elegance of this attempt at diversion can hardly become an "authentic American masterpiece" as Carl Van Vechten declared it to be.

The efforts of the "escapists", as Mrs. Wylie, Cabell, and Hergesheimer came to be known, met competition in the literature of a group of realists who were writing at this same time. Instead of running away from life,
these novelists presented, exactly as they occurred, the events, the characters, the surroundings of Middle class Americans. Theodore Dreiser of Indiana with his Sister Carrie and The American Tragedy, Edgar Lee Masters of Illinois with his Spoon River Anthology, and Sinclair Lewis with his Main Street, as well as many others, were fundamentally revolting as the escapists revolted, but their personal lack of ability to overcome the drabness they found everywhere, caused them to seek changes only among the people with whom they lived.

Of the protest raised by these writers, Peter Jack said: "Both realists and sophisticates were protesting against the lack of direction and grace and distinction that made American life difficult or impossible for a sensitive artist." Forces much greater than their attitudes or theories held these writers together, fighting in different fashions for a greater recognition, greater prominence, and greater compensation to creative artists.

Of Mrs. Wylie's other novels, Mr. Jack says: "One of them was turned into an unplayable play, since it was as brittle as the glass its hero was made of."

2 Ibid., p. 221.
3 Ibid., p. 146.
[the reader will recall the review of this play presented earlier in this paper in which Miss Hale, the critic, refers to the "brittle charm of figurines moving to melodies of the harp and strings"] "another was turned into a Book-of-the-Month success, since it brought Shelley to America. The last, Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard, was almost good and simple, like her poems; but her habits of imitation and affectation were ingrained. She had hoped to write a 'brief symbolic romance of the mind', but her symbol was still an esthetic snobbism, her mind a literary mannerism."4

Just as Elinor Wylie said in her poem "Nonsense",

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A pinch of fair, a pinch of foul,} \\
\text{And bad and good make best of all;} \\
\text{Beware the moderated soul} \\
\text{That climbs no fractional inch} \\
\text{to fall.}\end{align*}
\]

5

So in her work have been found 'fair and foul' passages for which she has been equally condemned and praised. Cabell, a severe critic as well as a staunch supporter, says:

Elinor Wylie had shown fatal gifts for being ineffectively humorous, and for confounding with the quaint that which to the candid seems unmistakably dull, and for reaching flat

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ pp. \ 146-147.\]

\[\text{Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 48.}\]
bathos where her avowed aim was seraphic beauty -- and all this too in connection with an unbridled capacity for self-criticism.\textsuperscript{6}

Again her self-defense is criticized by Allen Tate who believes the times were not conducive to her best work:

One of the defects of Mrs. Wylie's work is that the worst poems have much of the superficial merit of the best. The worst have invariably a metrical finish, a technical form, a verbal completeness, that remains hollow inside; the poet did not define her own relation to the material. This is a problem for the poet at all times, but it is now peculiarly the modern problem and one feels that Mrs. Wylie might have written more solidly in some other age, when the difficulty of self-defense was not so great.\textsuperscript{7}

This apparent fault of Mrs. Wylie's, of not defining her own position in relation to the subject about which she wrote, is obviously the result of the two worlds she knew, the one in which she lived and the one in which she wrote.

Miss Lechlitner writes of her error in making

\textsuperscript{6} Cabell, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 337.

\textsuperscript{7} Tate, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 107.
escape the dominant characteristic of her work:

The unconquered need to retreat from reality, in one sense her strength, was also, her greatest weakness. Her own personality, her ego masked by a protective sensitivity stood between her and the actual world. She lacked the impersonal, objective ability to reach out toward common experience and to find roots therein.8

Miss Lechlitner also suggests that Elinor Wylie should have stopped writing before her hand was stopped by God: "None of her last poems burns with a hard gem-like flame, none show quite that consummate mastery of the functional color, form, and texture of words which was her greatest gift."9

Elinor Wylie hoped for and aimed at greater recognition as a writer than she ever accomplished. Zabel said of her accomplishments:

For her art she hoped more than a "pattern of the atmosphere." She did not achieve it; but she lived to provide a volume of diversions among which are the half-dozen poems that confess a consciousness of esthetic responsi-


9 Ibid., p. 164.
bility and ambition which she did not live to fulfill.\textsuperscript{10}

Unfortunately for the literary world, Elinor Wylie began her work late and was allotted a period of only eight years for the accomplishment of her task. Into her brief writing career she crowded four volumes of poems and four novels, each demanding much research, in which she exacted of herself the greatest accuracy. She also wrote enough magazine miscellanies (short stories, critical essays, reviews, and humorous verse) to make up an additional volume.

It is difficult to know the physical suffering she endured during the weeks of confinement following the fatal accident which she experienced. From a fall downstairs her fractured backbone required that she be placed in a rigid uncomfortable position, yet her spirits were high and her brilliant mind was ever alert. The characters of her novels have been described by Gorman as: "all splintered diamond-facets from the crystalline mind of Mrs. Wylie."\textsuperscript{11}

Her unusual mind; her ego; her love and appreciation of esthetic beauty; her ability to express delicately

\textsuperscript{10} Zabel, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 281.

\textsuperscript{11} Gorman, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 686.
that which she saw and felt; and her ingrained passion for those things, material and immaterial which were beyond the reach of the average individual, were the factors which produced a novelist and poet better than many, yet not reaching the heights set and hoped for by herself. Of her ability Zabel said:

An agile wit was the factor which propelled her from charm to charm in her choice of materials: from historic themes to the most ingenious fragility and inaccessibility, to familiar encounters rendered desirable by the humor and elegance of imagination she brought to them.\textsuperscript{12}

Her "elegance of imagination" is made evident in many of the strange and daring similies and metaphors she created. In her poem "City Morning" she states:

\begin{quote}
The bells are thorns to
Split the morning.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

And in her poem "Love to Stephen" she says:

\begin{quote}
Beneath a silk mitten
Your fingers are razors.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

And again in "Benvenuto's Valentine",

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{12} Zabel, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 277.
\textsuperscript{13} Wise, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 87.
\end{quote}
Nor Hamlet exquisite and thin
As moonbeams in an inky cape.\textsuperscript{15}

A daring figure here marks these lines from the poem "The Lie":

Your constancy the stars;\textsuperscript{!} and
not the moon's:
And I would trust you with my
silver spoons!\textsuperscript{16}

Delicacy is found in this comparison:

Forget the festivals and pentecosts
Of metaphysics, and the lesser fears
Confound us, and seal up our eyes
and ears
Like little rivers locked below
the frosts.\textsuperscript{17}

Mrs. Wylie's poetry and prose are outstanding, if
for no other reason than for the fact that there may be
found in it little or no smut or blasphemy. Rarely, if
ever, does she touch upon the intimate, the personal, or
upon sex problems which many writers clothe in artificial
language in order to justify their presentation. However,
Gorman says: "The apparent coldness in Elinor Wylie's work
has been misunderstood by readers who were looking for the

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Black Armour}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Angels and Earthly Creatures}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., "Sonnet XVIII", p. 20.
ruddy stupefactions of sentimentanism."18 Mr. Gorman then goes on to say:

Here is neither a case of cold nor warmth, but rather one of rhythms, and by rhythm I mean the curious capacity of thought for circumscribing static points of passion with melodic and luminous nuances.19

That she cherished with a personal warmth the luxuries of the world, particularly silver, has been pointed out earlier. In her poems, the elegance of silver is made prominent by her many references to it. In "Three Elegies" she said:

But all the love he had to give was silver bright and cold.20

And from "The Birth of Firth"

"Come in, dear heart", the lady spoke, Her voice was sharp as a silver lancet.21

From " -- In a Country Churchyard"

18 Gorman, op. cit., p. 680.
19 Loc. Cit.
20 Wise, op. cit., p. 12.
21 Ibid., p. 11.
Give me a linen shroud, an
oaken coffin
Unpierceable, though silver trumpets called.\textsuperscript{22}

In "Hymn to Earth" she states:

The element of water has denied
Its child; it is no more his element;
It never will relent;
Its silver harvests are more sparsely given
Than the rewards of heaven.\textsuperscript{23}

And in "Sonnet XI" is found:

So have I lost my only wedding dower,
The veins of spring, enclosed within my heart,
Traced small in silver like a celestial chart.\textsuperscript{24}

And finally from "On a Singing Girl":

Musa of the sea-blue eyes,
Silver nightingale, alone
In a little coffin lies:
A stone beneath a stone.\textsuperscript{25}

Many more uses of the word "silver" are made in Mrs. Wylie's

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 57.

\textsuperscript{23} Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 13.

\textsuperscript{25} Black Armour, p. 76.
poems, but like her reference to death, examples are too numerous to mention. Mrs. Wylie wrote frequently of the brevity of life, and yet her attitude toward death was not one of fear. Wilson said:

There are beings -- and sometimes among the noblest -- who pass their lives in the shadow of death. Putting all faith in the ecstasy of the senses, they cannot but fear the moment when the senses must fade; for them, with the death of the body, the world must end. But for a spirit such as Elinor Wylie, death can never quite seem serious.26

In "Sonnet I", her reference to death is not in a manner of fear:

Now shall the long homesickness have an end
Upon your heart, which is a part of all
The past no human creature may recall
Save you, who are persuasive to unbend
The brows of death, and name him for a friend.27

Again in "Sonnet VIII", she is not afraid of death:

26 Edmund Wilson, "In Memory of Elinor Wylie", New Republic, February 6, 1929, p. 316.

27 Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 3.
Thus absence chills us to apparent death
And withers up our virtue, but together
We grow beyond vagaries of the weather
And make a summer of our mingled breath
Wherein we flourish, and forget to know
We must lie murdered by predestined snow.28

In "Robin Hood's Heart", she is specific about life's short span:

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The bridge between our death
    and birth
Is only a matter of inches.29
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Possibly she was concerned over how much she would be missed when she wrote in the same poem:

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At the little noise our death
    will make
No red deer need stand still.30
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For one who saw the shadow of death upon her as Mrs. Wylie did, it seems queer that she did not include in her writing more material of a religious nature. While religion was not considered of primary importance by her,

28 Ibid., p. 10.
29 Ibid., p. 42.
30 Ibid., p. 43.
she was a Christian as is evident in her poem entitled "Twelfth Night". In her poem "The Broken Man", she says cautiously:

Or else presentiment caused
the counterfeit
Presentment to appear as
exquisite
Almost -- for I must only
say "almost" --
As the child of Mary and
the Holy Ghost.31

From "Sonnet XII" comes this reference bearing evidence of her recognition of the Christ Child:

I dreamt I was the mother of
a son
Who had deserved a manger
for a crib.32

In many instances Mrs. Wylie has made reference to "manna", "swaddling clothes", and to "Heaven", further substantiating her interest in religion.

In the poem called "Self-Portrait", she describes herself as no biographer could do:

A lens of crystal whose
transparence calms
Queer stars to clarity, and
disentangles
Fox-fires to form austere

31 Ibid., p. 55.
refracted angles:
A texture polished on the
horny palme
Of vast equivocal creatures,
beast or human:
A flint, a substance finer-grained than snow,
Graved with the Graces in intaglio
To set sarcastic sigil on the woman.

This for the mind, and for the little rest
A hollow scooped to blackness in the breast,
The simulacrum of a cloud, a feather:
Instead of stone, instead of sculptured strength,
This soul, this vanity, blown hither and thither
By trivial breath, over the whole world's length.33

One might think that Mrs. Wylie should have made a greater effort to hide the identity of the literary works from which hers was often inspired. In her poem "Demon Lovers", an unmistakable recognition of Wordsworth's "I Wander Lonely as a Cloud" is seen in the second stanza:

He wanders lonely as a cloud
In chevelure of curled perruque;
Masked assassins in a crowd
Strangle the uxorious duke.34

33 Black Armour, p. 41.
34 Ibid., p. 46.
Certainly the beautiful thought of Nature is lost in Mrs. Wylie's use of Wordsworth's expression.

In compensation for the passages in Elinor Wylie's writing which are too evidently not of her own invention she has contributed to literature a delicate lacy, fragility which is distinctly hers. In the poem "Sequence" is a touch of this fragility:

... and because its bones were light
As filagree as pearl.35

And again in "Unfinished Portrait",

... nor make you visible
Through jewelled arabesques
which adhere to clothe
The outline of your soul.36

In the opening lines of "Chimera Sleeping", Mrs. Wylie has woven a pattern of light and shadow:

Ah, lovely thing, I saw you lie
Within a beam of the sun's eye,
Where falling light and flying shade
Were bound together in a braid
Made of sky and earth colour.37

35 Ibid., p. 54.
36 Ibid., p. 58.
In the poem "South", Mrs. Wylie has presented intricate impressions of the senses as they were made upon her while living in the South. Jessica North is charmed by Mrs. Wylie's intricate mosaics:

The intricate perfection of Elinor Wylie's poetry usually delays the reader's emotional reaction. One feels such admiration for the excellence of the mosaic that it makes little difference what the poet is talking about; nevertheless she always has an original and a profound theme.38

**SOUTH**

Spotted by sun, and visible
Above me in a wave-green vault,
With that thick sticky linden-smell
Saturate, as the sea with salt.

Transmuting all the blue to green
And all the green to serpents' tongues,
Deep, ponderable, felt and seen,
And breathed in pain, with heavy lungs.

Is this that limber element
Which runs like light, and will not stop
To drink the apple's sap and scent
While thirsting for the mountain-top?39

While the subject is neither profound nor original, yet

38 North, op. cit., p. 96.

39 Black Armour, op. cit., p. 45.
The carefully chosen words weave patterns of color and impart sensations in no ordinary manner.

The fragile beauty produced in "Now That your Eyes are Shut"

And I command each cloud
To be precise in spilling water.

Let light forbear those lids;
I have forbidden the feathery ash
to smutch them;
The spider thread that thrids
The gray-plumed grass has not my
leave to touch them.40

is not to be outdone by poets vying for the crown of exquisitess.

Mrs. Wylie again strengthens her position as a writer of prose and poetry which has been a definite contribution to the field of literature through passages such as these last four lines of "Phases of the Moon":

But in May when the moon is full
Bright as water and white as wool,
Look for her where she loves to be,
Asleep in a high magnolia tree.41

And from The Orphan Angel, one of her prose works,

A slim boy mounted upon a cream-coloured pony was watch-

40 Ibid., p. 65.
41 Wise, op. cit., p. 73.
ing him from the circle of braves; 
the lad appeared very proud and 
comely in a sleeveless tunic of 
soft white buckskin and long 
fringed leggings covered with an 
arabesque of beads. Across his 
forehead he wore a band of silver, 
and there were silver bracelets 
on his arms and sea-shells in 
his ears.42

The injection of a calm, cool character, magnificently dressed and speaking as he did in a tranquil manner of the wild Comanches whom Shiloh feared, is the type of writing for which Elinor Wylie is rejected by some and applauded by others. Whether to burden a novel with the long, heavily laden description for which her prose works are noted is a question the reader must weigh against the porcelain-like and intricate patterns she weaves with carefully chosen words.

That she had moments of reminiscing and wondering, is evident in her poem "Silver Bells and Cockle Shells", in which she tells of her running away from Hichborn, her life with Wylie, and finally her love for Benét. The escape she sought from events in her life were carried into her flights of fancy in prose and poetry. It engendered always

an attitude of courage, either defiant or stoic.

Though Tate believed the times not suitable for the work of which she was capable, yet the impulse to "run away", so deeply ingrained, might not have been encouraged had she lived in another period of literature. Even in a little poem of four lines such as "The Pekingese" she carries one to the far-away city of Pekin:

This Pekingese, that makes the sand grains spin,
Is digging little tunnels to Pekin:
Dream him emerging in a porcelain cave
Where wounded dragons stain a pearly wave.43

The word "porcelain" has been used many times to describe Mrs. "ylie's poetry. More of her appreciation of fine things is manifested in her love of porcelain images. In her novel, The Venetian Glass Nephew, a porcelain image is the next most important figure, the important one being Rosalba who eventually becomes porcelain, too. In her poetry the word "porcelain" is frequently used and in both poems "The Doll"44 and "The Broken Man"45, a porcelain

43 Wise, op. cit., p.96.
44 Ibid., p.82.
45 Angels and Earthly Creatures, p. 55.
figure becomes that around which she weaves her delicate and fragile phrases.

In her serious and profound moments, she wrote such things as "Hymn to Earth." Her eleven line stanza with a rhyme scheme of $a_b b c_c a_a d d e e$ is as strange as the carefully chosen and meaningful words—strange because generally Elinor Wylie was not profound. In a poem entitled, "Farewell, Sweet Dust," she deals much more slightly with a topic similar to that of "Hymn to Earth".

Probably Miss Lechlitner is generous in saying about Mrs. Wylie:

> Although least American, in the sense that she drew almost nothing from the American scene, past or present, Elinor Wylie is ranked as the most distinguished woman poet of the twenties.

By whatever degree one wishes to accept Miss Lechlitner's opinion of Mrs. Wylie, surely it must be recognized that she, Mrs. Wylie, has created in poetry a distinctive kind of writing, reflecting the influence of the classicist, the

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46 Ibid., p. 32.
47 Ibid., p. 51.
48 Lechlitner, op. cit., p. 164.
romanticist, the imagist, and the impressionist. Her desire to run from the realist made her the escapist we know; but her own power with words placed her on a pedestal among poets of her time. In prose, she dared to write in poetic style creating sights and sounds and odors as fragile as the gauzy wings of numerous beautifully colored insects. It is possible that had she lived, she would have created other works of prose and poetry, more delicate in their escape than those for which the literary world is now indebted.

Kohler idealizes her in the following manner:
"This exquisite stylist dying at the age of forty-one has left greater demands upon posterity than many who have devoted a life time to the practice of letters." 49

Gorman adds to this obituary: "Mrs. Wylie's best poems are jeweled instances in the fluctuating toils of Time. They are abstractions given a body and a shape and accoutred in armour." 50

Edmund Wilson said: "A mind alive with thoughts and images, at what seemed its point of fullest activity,

49 Kohler, op. cit., p. 218.

50 Gorman, op. cit., p. 680.
was annihilated at a single stroke."51

Perhaps because Eleanor Wylie was so perturbed and distressed with the cruelty, tragedy, and grievous conditions she witnessed, even if she did not actually experience them, she sought escape in a beautiful, delicate, fragile, and exquisite manner, for which her name will be engraved on the pages of literary history.

51 Wilson, op. cit., p. 316.
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