

Opus · Frank Shynnagh

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1972, as I was finishing my doctoral dissertation on the shifting boundaries between contemporary philosophical thought and poetic expression, I found myself looking for a pungent example from recent American writing lives. It happened that I had read several journal-published poems of Frederic Will, and one book of criticism—*Literature Inside Out* (1966)—and by one of those syntheses the mind creates without consulting itself, I put these texts together as samples of what I was looking for, that shifting zone between poetry and philosophy. From that impulse I checked Will's book-life, wrote to him, and began a reading of his work. Only now do I feel ready to assess that opus, and to offer the following short account of his achievement. Potential, weakness, and some of the thrusts of our time muscle through this work.

Will's first book, *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought* (1958), appeared when he was thirty. That book makes its past clear in ways that past could never have done for itself. (No instant of time has the power to criticize itself.) *Intelligible Beauty's* zone is the eighteenth century: Samuel Johnson, Voltaire, Goethe, minds we understand without effort, but with some envy of their sanity. We touch in this book Moses Mendelssohn's aesthetic, Hazlitt and Quincy on the Elgin Marbles, Herder—biopsies of thought at work feeling art, knowing through those feelings, reflecting onto itself through knowing. Mini-dramas of the eighteenth century. Scholarship this is . . . but a distillate. The heart of this work is the long essay on Herder and Kant. Both writers struggle with intelligibility, fighting to see it emerge from the experience of *das Schoene*, the beautiful. Herder finally struck closer to what Will considered the center. It was in the tactile that Herder found the organ of beauty, a lifegiving return to the muscularities of art. (Will himself—lover of the sculpture of Mestrovic—will never tire of that plunge.) His whole book is a scholarly tribute to the discovering passions of the aesthetic. Repeating, doing again the thought of the past, he comes out into the perennial clearing of art and the beautiful.

Literature Inside Out (1966) argues through cultural history, but does its

best to stare directly into the aesthetic sun. “Literature and Knowledge,” for instance, works with the game of Plato’s *Ion*. How, Plato asks, can Homer pretend to know more—about any of the skills he describes—than the practitioner of that skill? (The charioteer or shoe maker) In answering for *Ion*, Will turns to imagination, granting that faculty a unique cognitive power. He places the aesthetic at the heart of knowing, finds it practical. “From Naming to Fiction Making” addresses aspects of naming; from its primitive magic to its theific power. The poet is mythmaker, a figura fondled in other parts of the book—in discussions of Heidegger, Hölderlin, even of Aristotle. The aesthetic lays out and pursues the highest claims. But first, even in order to formulate those claims, it must be cognitive.

Will’s poetry sprouted from the same seeds as the thought-prose of this time. *Mosaic* (1959) and *A Wedge of Words* (1963) may be thin and lonely. Much is lost here: “the turning world / you failed to hear / you failed to see . . .” The knowing process is elusive in this art. Yet in the

head, that gifted bone,
still copulate old fibers, old cotton laws
which, in a modicum of childhoods,
sufficient moisture in the mental fields
should exercise, inseminate, and could,
some softest boll remembering, caress, unseal . . .

From the head can range laws—the newly found knowable. Such copulations are figures of new vision, and as such make their version of ethical demand. A cubed, rectangular image of St. Paul faces its depicter, insisting that

a man must stand
to face this wall . . .

Even when mere observation riots it is with compassion or nostalgia. In “Gypsies near Monemvasia” the disembodied spectator flees with dreamed shapes. In “Long Day” the failed lover despairs, longingly, at the sight of others’ handholdings. But “Death on the Cellular Level” implies that simply naming the horror, slowly, helps us respond to it. The aesthetic consoles, remakes the world.

Cared-for language, that aesthetic, presses to the center of these early poems. (Even to the center of that curiosity, *Fragments*; Will's sixteen-year-old posies of language, a birthday gift to his demurring dad.) The reigning concept of this poetry is art as center, from which the whole of life fans into knowing and doing. The reigning act is practising the benefit of art, reading through the sensuous—as Herder did—into meaning only accessible along that route. Travelling to work through art, then already being there, where art was going: repetition in that sense, the doing again—and possibly better—what was already done: all that is the route life offers toward its unfolding.

Will's first large published translation, *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* (1964), was of an epic by Kostas Palamas. In a note to the translation he wrote: "I hacked it away from the Greek, twenty lines a day. In Greece, then in the Mid-West—hotels, motels. Palamas was form, and I wanted it." The result is American poetry whacking ear and eye, high-energy particles. Will's critical book, *The Knife in the Stone* (1973), was drawn from just such daily experience with translation. Close aesthetic prying opened conceptual vistas—poetry and the conceptual openly generating one another. His journal of poetry and translation, *Micromegas*, turned in its second year (1966) to poetry in translation. The act of knowing—translating, reading—the other, a philosophical problem folded into its including deed, was to motivate much of Will's thought about the kind of thinking poetry is.

Philosophers like Hilary Putnam and Willard Quine argue that translation is par excellence the testing ground for the possibility of intelligibility. Can I know another's pain? His or her anxiety? The negative response, which translation exists to counteract, takes the form of an "incommensurability thesis." Putnam describes it this way:

the thesis that terms used in another culture, say, the term "temperature" as used by a seventeenth century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions *we* possess. As Kuhn puts it, scientists with different paradigms inhabit "different worlds" . . . the rejoinder this time is that if this thesis were really true then we could not translate other languages—or even past stages

of our own language—at all. And if we cannot interpret organisms' noises at all, then we have no ground for regarding them as *thinkers*, *speakers*, or even *persons*. (p. 114, *Reason, Truth, and History*)

The possibility of translation, in other words, is identical with the possibility of remembering, and living in, a distant culture; it is *the* act for testing the unity of our humanity.

The Science of the Aesthetic, of course, stinks of the bourgeois. Born as that discipline was in a *bürgerliches Deutschland*, just over two centuries ago, how would it not have sopped up the odors of its instant? Yet as a discipline of inquiry aesthetics prospered from its uncontroversial mediatory role, friend to both science and the arts of morality. (Baumgarten and Kant looked at it this way.) To that role of the Aesthetic, Will was drawn, and in working out its topography he constantly crosses the poetry-philosophy border which fascinates me.

Discovery out from the senses can only mean to Will: I discover where I came from, prepare for a brightening self-identity. Several mid-point works—*Metaphrasis* (1964), *Planets* (1968), *Herondas* (1972)—chart this new turn of the head. Each of these texts displays a wider scope. Will the traveller-lover begins to replace Will the observer-recorder. In his vocabulary the word *account* begins to replace *record* and *report*. He grows more critical of the phantom self—the corrected and idealized self—which he, like us all, carries and constructs around him.

Planets, strong poetry at last: people, places, feelings nailed through hard language against the wall of the page. “To the others in the Apartment House” calls on those others “to respect in us our cranial purposes,” and finally “to think, with us, of a better way to die.”

We ask your remembrance,
some have paid too little heed
tried to pretend that silence
was all we were.

We ask you to forgive.
Seeing in us at least our huge
cranial purposes; if not
the truth, at least its vessels.

We ask you to come down,
circle the moving van with roses,
carry our bags. We ask you one
after another to remember.

We ask you to turn away
separately, remembering clearly.
Going within to think, with us,
quietly, of a better way to die.

In the poem “Planets” the narrator wonders from where, on the moon’s pocked surface, “greenage” has grown. In “Teiresias” the narrator finds that he has been conversing with a phantom, his “eyes filmy and dead,” and comes to himself in shock. In “Late Afternoon” the narrator and interlocutor are trapped in staring at the declining wall of day, and sense “the lax succulent will to push back.” People are locked together here, tight in their death suits, flowing in their love suits. The line of poetry is longer and suppler now; the forms holding it less stipulated, as if to embrace a larger and less guaranteed human content. The themes have not been edifying or encouraging, but the writer’s exposed surface has widened. The question raised in *Intelligible Beauty*—does the beautiful contain the intelligible and the socially meaningful?—is unfolding.

Herondas leads this enrichment into experiment—in the history of scholarship. This book excels in its assault on the dogma of scholarly purity. Scholarship on *Herondas*, Will argues, plays itself out in a pattern of complicities, which applies not only to scholarship generally but to the whole cognitive web in which individual knowing acts gesticulate. No thinker, no observer need not be taken into account in his own thought, for the experiment includes the experimenter, in the humanities as well as in Planck’s physics. Scholarly commentary on *Herondas* is engagement with him, a “carrying out his enterprise,” is meeting scholarship’s inner demand to “eke out art,” even to “say better what the poet tried to say.” The scholarly act is thus not that different from *poiesis*. It assembles, shapes, then rebuilds again. It *has* to imagine. It *has* to be the originality of others.

Metaphrasis (1964) and *Micromegas* were parallel expressions of this widening argument. The former was a student-inspired printing experiment,

fresh and budding; the year's fruits of directing the University of Iowa Translation Workshop. (Will thought this the highest University experience of his life, since the Workshop, with its profusion of mature foreign writers, exploded the University framework from within the University. His later thoughts, about the open University of culture, will evidently spring from this moment.) *Micromegas*, on the other hand, was a commitment. This review of poetry and translation is its editor's long term cry; bring in the languages, drive them laterally up against one another, watch the lava of competing claims. Will has guided into English-pressure lyrics from German, Spanish, Polish, Chinese, Manx, Hungarian, Japanese, Swedish. . . . His passion is to sit down at the Feast of Language; not as linguist or pedagogue, but as a famished consumer of things' names. Once again the hard gemlike flame catches reflections, the milling throb of human reality.

Such effort to share the world's tongue is another indication of Will's fire for community, for some kind of enlargement of the aesthetic from within it. In the sixties Will was talking of "speaking in tongues," and "putting the world's things in order." In a prose piece of the time he displays a man "looking out his window at a starry sky." The man sees a star out of place, "ruining the shape of its constellation." He reaches out, tries to put the star back in place, and tumbles into the street below.

Brandy in the Snow (1972): poetic fossils of an experience which had chucked Will onto *his* head. Emö was the name of the force, which wiped away history, which made consciousness seem enough.

Emö batters the writer. The two of them are dancing the foxtrot in the 1930s, in Santiago de Chile; it becomes dawn and they penetrate one another with their "thousand year old bodies." He has just arrived in another country, Hungary, and is desperately trying to call Emö through the Atlantic. His call makes its inhibited route through the weedy underwater pulp. Or he has just returned home from visiting Emö in *her* country—Hungary—and is in O'Hare. He throws his last plane ticket stub in a dustbin. Suddenly he is surrounded by guards, who "mention her name to him," tell him she is well. In the last scene he is at home, staring inwardly on the "wreckage of his loss." He looks out on the Iowa River, covered as it is with its "delicate scab of ice." Not everything in this volume scars, but

everything thwacks the historyless moment against the page. Even the brandy:

A little brandy in the snow shovels the walks
it eats into the ground
it lets last autumn's old marron blades
cheek into forgotten chlorophyll
it chips the edges of the sidewalk
it makes old men slip
antically and their wives' calves gossip
with each other
and dogs turn green pissing
and speak afrikaans to each other
and professors of philosophy leave the phone
off the hook for hours and dream
and girls take their hair off
in cheesetrays and leave it around the room
and old pieces of cloth turn red
A little brandy in the snow . . .

The overspill of the aesthetic floods more generously now. Art is having to do the work that history will no longer do for it.

Whatever revolution interests Will is at its clearest in *The Fact of Literature* (1973). There he denies the scholar's innocence, brings scholarly thought into relation with art, questions the subject-object relation in knowing. (He says the scholar can claim no effectual subject-object relation to the knowable; that the scholar is integrally involved with what he knows.) He also adds, to this range of insights, new acquaintance with the thought of Theodor Adorno. (Will and Tarnowski translated Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* [1973] from which they have to have learned how tight is the bond between good thinking and engaged thinking.) What Will finds, as he thinks out from Adorno toward knowing literature, is that literature has no past, that it must be engaged from the present. The way he argues this is simple, forceful, and related to the charmed blank looks of his face, when questioned about his own non-existent, to-be-reconstructed, past.

In writing, or reading literature we are always constructing out from the present. (In *Archilochus* [1969] and *Herondas* Will traces this construction in action.) The past, Will begins to see, is a momentarily balanced hypothesis of order, best understood by moving back into it. (At the University of Texas, in the early sixties, he had been one of the two founding editors of the influential Classics journal, *Arion*; had worked there, as a maverick ideologue, toward a creative epistemology of the past.) Moving back into the literary past meant, to him, starting from your own moment. Cultural histories should be written backwards, from the more meaningful present to the less meaningful past. (In an essay of 1970, "Shamans in Turtlenecks," Will discusses cognitive borderlines, horizons back to which we can see, but beyond which all is shadow. For him one border is the Hittites; about whose laughing vestiges, in the Ankara Museum, he writes with shaky interpretive longing; while at the same time questioning whether, in a stricter sense, our tribal self-reflection doesn't break off at the eighteenth century.)

The Knife in the Stone (1973) is at its best on translation; Will's ground, the mediatory sword. (In *Micromegas* as editor; in interiorizing translations of Palamas and Adorno; in self-reflective teaching of "foreign languages"; in all these Will-roles translation forces open a Pandora's box of issues.) His essay on "The Oneness of Literature" opens translational ground to new inquiries; posing the stubborn question, in what language does translation between two languages take place? The answer—in a third language, consciousness language—once again wipes out the historical dimension. (The aesthetic and the historical are clashing poles in Will's topography. The aesthetic seems to be the true dignity of the historical.)

It follows, from this view of the act of translation, that the original work holds no copyright on what it wishes to say. That original, and the translation of it, cooperate in competing efforts to state the same thing, what the original wishes to say; to state it in a language which, standing between original and translation, confers intelligibility on both of them—is thus consciousness language. Subsequent translations of the same original participate similarly in that third language. The dynamics of interaction, among a series of translations of the same original, are a model for the interaction of influences in literary history. Such interweaving can best be

scrutinized—as one sees from *The Fact of Literature*—by opening up the past from the standpoint of the present.

Certain essays in *Belphagor* (1977) win ground for the aesthetic, claim for word care a spirit-cleaning function. (Will argues here for the kind of aesthetic-social regeneration Marcuse envisages in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*.) “Literature and Ikonic Language” dares this extension, aiming its argument at the author’s own poem, “Brandy in the Snow.” “The Argument of Water,” the longest essay in *Belphagor*, is an ambitious study of various kinds of discourse: of religious, scientific, and poetic statements, as they bear on the “topic of water.” (The same scientific proposition will mean very differently, depending on whether it appears in James Joyce or James Jeans.) In this linguistic analysis, Will is teaching himself to resee artistic language as functional; and to appreciate the functional work done by language in society. The first essay in the book had taken that route to social considerations. Roger Garaudy was the theme, in his concern for the moralities of rewriting history. Will came out quietly on Garaudy’s side, arguing for rewriting, for the systematic making of the history, thus the future, we need. Strong social statements, urging themselves from Will’s aesthetic, are at this point shouts—shouts reaching to the final shores this essay will trace, to Will’s trilogy on labor, solidarity, and the aesthetic.

Will’s last three published books of poems answer to the growths in complexity and commitment, which enforce themselves in his prose. “Botulism,” the long poem of the volume of that name, is an extravaganza of historical despair; weariness, of the Vietnam debacle, wound through acanthus leaves, fading Parthenon friezes, and Rabbis’ sickles. *Guatemala*, a volcanic six-poem edition, once more tracks *res gestas* through craters of language; marks read, this time, on select remains of the Mayan temple complex at Tikal:

Suddenly the stela takes a turn for the worse.
Who cut the priesthood back
Sheared innocent features from their diamond of sense?

Suddenly the power goes like wind from the stela.
We dash our lips to history’s throat.
We breathe like tornadoes
Through the rock’s hollow skin.

Suddenly the stela takes a turn for the better.
Forgotten features puff like cysts on the tattered rock.

The priest breaks his eyes
Open from the carnal rock.
He has seven fingers of blood in his vision.

Suddenly the stela takes a turn for the worse.
It devours the earnest face of a child.

It opens from the silence yet is only the silence.

It swells and blossoms before our eyes.
Then it dries like a heart.
It dries like a heart and blows away.

The carved features of the Mayan priests were mutilated by invaders or rivals, who thereby cut off the power of the priest's stela records, the history of the people. The poem makes its own effort to blow life back into deflated cysts.

Epics of America (1977) quantum jumps Will's poetry to the level of the arguments in *Belphagor*. Flexibility of perspective, a lonely ironic wonder, constantly reconstructed belief in integrity, belief even in "an America"; all these traces of theme muscle their way through fifty snapshots of being in America. I note, because its tone has so far gone unmentioned here, a certain "aperture onto the gods," which flickers in and out of these poems:

Lightly the swan arches its double iceberg of feathers,
rises from a grave at the edge of the lake,
and disappears in a network of cirrus clouds . . .

But swans cannot even fly!

Then he tries this marvel on other friends who are credulous . . .
each one leans at first toward the story,
pleased with the account.

Tales go to meet their maker when the real world,
sawed into chunks by observation,
sheds its deceptive euphony, parts, and in that
second of seeing to the heart of things
drops like a too ripe pear into the center of the room.

Lightly the swan arches its double iceberg of feathers.
We follow its flight over the summer harbor,
its gradual disappearance at the edge of the runway . . .

Now were we talking in truth of a swan?
All we expected, maybe, was the birth of a god . . .
but that could not be . . .

Then letting the swan through our fingers we watch it mount,
leaving in the palms of our hands
some bright slick feathers it wore for its going-beyond . . .

All our uncertainties mass here. Yet the truth and its going-beyond are
present to their absence.

What Will has sent me, out of his later work, grows straight up. There are
forays into the political, social, and ethical—for instance, *The Knife in the
Stone* and *Belphagor*—which widen the concerns of *Intelligible Beauty. Epics
of America*—especially the long last piece of it—folds messages for the polis
under its shaggy wing, enlarging the formal-ethical challenge of “Mosaic.”

Will sent me a recent essay on poetry and scholarship, which marks a
new headlongness, and directness of self-encounter. The essay refines on
the senses in which poetry-making is a wedding to the future, while
scholarship is a defense of the past. In defending the past humane scholar-
ship obliterates pastness, thus making everything into the future; while in
wedding the future poetry wrestles the present to the ground, making it,
as nothing else but art can, a past.

Will’s newest unpublished volumes of poetry—*Yes Indeed his Military
Career* and *Group Portrait with Molybdenum*—aim to “confound the border
guards, who stand between poetry and scholarship.” Anthropology is the

bridge over which the poet and scholar, different gesturers toward time, move toward one another. The anthropologist writes the *Group Portrait*: a mind family of four, who are cut loose into a time-warp; who wander, posturing, through time and poem. Poems, in this collection, are the anthropologist's made excursions, within the family, into an empirical-historical world.

I envied another Me, Me inside me. I hid awaiting the gnome Me, leapt, chased him. The gnome Me ran to a childhood garden, showed off a scrotum. I ran to it, Man's potential! Then carried my sack, sowing it over a ladies landscape, smiled to see complicated little Me's, eyeballs of chrome, springing up; I ran on. The gnome I'd followed scared me for hours without stopping. I came to a bridge and sat down, lonely because I had run so far from my beginnings. An old man stopped beside me. It was my father in a suit of dreams. He questioned me about still another Me, the Me that had made him. I began to feel uneasy. I shifted and fidgeted. I told my father I had an appointment in the City. But there I met Grandfather Me, Father's dream of me. I huddled up, yelled, then fired. Grandfather Me dropped like a pile of papers. I hurried away before they could get me. I no longer envied the Me inside me.

From this degree of socialization the show marches. *Micromegas* has become the nub of Will's translation and travel enterprise. To me the recent Manx issue takes the same new path toward anthropology. Translation has turned into an act-in-process, displays one culture being, or trying to be, expressed in terms of another. The trying is the issue; obdurate brushing together of words from cultures close in space, infinitely separate in root; the poetry of impossible strain exercised against English. Will's newest projection of *Micromegas*, a Tarahumar issue, sounds planned as an explicit learning exercise. (A catch phrase to which he turns, in describing whatever scholarship he finds himself doing; scholarship becoming "inquiry seen at the point where in fact it becomes *poiesis*, rude poetry.") Perhaps this editorial discovery, as he calls it, may be his longest stride into the heart of the aesthetic; for here again aesthetic territory borders on

domains of historical knowing, and is only by an imagination-stride separated from ethical will.

Finally two trilogies. First there was *The Fall and the Gods* (1988–1991), then, *Heartland: A Vision of the Future* (1990–1992). Working through these books together, I saw what had grown from Will's initial interest in the shifting borders between poetry and philosophy, the theme that initially drew me toward him. He had discovered that crossing those borders, from each expression into the other, was a journey into the dimensions first of continuity — the leitmotif of *The Fall and the Gods*, and then of solidarity, the leitmotif of *Heartland: A Vision of the Future*.

The former trilogy looks at the god-filled universe we create from the absence of god. We fall. We are our human equipment, nothing more. But through art, love, patience we reestablish a whole around us, in which we can thrive and give. We're pragmatists. But we're more than that. The use-value we live through is the skill of our imaginations, to make in them a home for the supreme in meaning. So potent is this concern for the *pragma*, the useable thing, that in deploying it we make a world pervaded with significance, and become its scions. Poetry is the key to this generation, philosophy the organ by which we discern the wholeness of this newly made world.

Heartland: A Vision of the Future flows from Will's discovery of continuity in daily life. (Noumenal continuity had always been apparent to him. Why else was Plotinus from the start his chosen philosopher, Goethe's *Naturphilosophie* his chosen science, the lichen — that stubborn emblem of continuity between the organic and granite — the lynchpin in his experience of nature?) Quite simply, he interviews the world around him, in the eastern Iowa he's grown to love. (How it resembles the rolling greens north of Sydney, my own shaping landscape; how freely you can talk on those Iowa backroads, which are already in advance the backroads of my own mind.) First (in *Big Rig Souls*), he interviews truckers — guys and gals encountered in truckstops around the Midwest, usually in Iowa; then (in *Assemblyline Arguments*) he lets assembly line workers become his speech — men and women in foundries, feed mills, packing houses; then, in volume three called *Hightech Hogs*, he turns on inside him the voices of contemporary hog farmers in eastern Iowa. The result of this interviewing, this becom-

ing the language of work in his own environment, is to give Will a new voice of his own, that of the continuity of labor. What he has given me to understand—I look back to my first encounter with his work twenty years ago—is that the shifting borders of poetry and philosophy are fixable stillnesses across which the subtle mesh of Being is constantly moving. In that mesh, of which Will and I have in fact become expressions, catch facets of what-is so brilliant that we must turn away from their glare.