

“And We Are Homesick Still”: Home, the Unhomely, and the Everyday in Anne Wilkinson

Kathy Mezei

Volume 30, numéro 1, spring 2005

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl30_1art08

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Mezei, K. (2005). “And We Are Homesick Still”:: Home, the Unhomely, and the Everyday in Anne Wilkinson. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 30(1), 160–180.

Résumé de l'article

Critical attention has been given to the natural and metaphysical elements of Anne Wilkinson's poetry, but the significance of the home and images of everyday life have been ignored. Although it is often obscured, the domestic plays a vital role in the unfolding of Wilkinson's poetics and modernity. Tension between the domestic and the mythic constitutes an ongoing philosophical and poetic inquiry in her works; Wilkinson juxtaposes the decorative and the monumental in an attempt to grapple with modernist conceptions of reality. Her diction and contradictory images alter the reader's understanding of the everyday to involve the intangible and metaphysical. Wilkinson's use of house and home imagery is not intended to domesticate, but to map out a topography of memory, imagination, and the location of the self.

“And We Are Homesick Still”: Home, the Unhomely, and the Everyday in Anne Wilkinson

KATHY MEZEI

Locating Home

HOUSES, HOME, HOMESICKNESS, AND HOMELESSNESS reverberate through Anne Wilkinson's poetry, prose, and autobiographical writing. Born into the privileged Osler family and raised amid stately mansions and large summer estates in southern Ontario, she is obsessed by houses, the unhomely, and a pervasive sense of dislocation.¹ Although Wilkinson probably never “washed a dish or held a duster in her life” (Coldwell, “Walking” 10), her journals and letters are preoccupied with domestic affairs, her poetry playfully infiltrated by a language of dailiness.

Like other modernist women poets, however, her poetry at times appears to waver between the language and subject of domesticity expressed through the everyday and the decorative *and* the mythic and symbolic as well as the abstract, historic, and monumental. Her ambivalence towards the domestic and the everyday reflects that of modernism, for as Christopher Reed notes, the “domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism, a crucial site of anxiety and subversion” (16). Yet, the domestic is also a site of creative tension in writers such as Virginia Woolf, particularly when inflected by gender issues such as the role of women in public and private spheres, the construction of the subject(s), or the evolution of an individual or feminine modernist poetic. These contradictory impulses surface in Wilkinson's poetry and prose, the contradictions themselves constituting an ongoing philosophical and poetic inquiry. Thus, in the opening lines of her best-known poem, “Lens,” “The poet's daily chore / Is my long duty” (82), the everyday (daily chore, duty, milk) merges with an aesthetic inquiry (what makes a poet?). Although Dean Irvine astutely points out that

“the labour of making a poem is feminized” (Introduction 20), this poem, like most of her work, walks an aesthetic tightrope between the language and experience of the everyday and a highly intertextual and allusive language, as in the clever image of “Eve and Adam, pearled / With sweat, staring at an apple core” (“Lens” 84).²

What Robert Lecker and other critics³ have signalled as a pattern of “polar oppositions” (35) between the quick and the dead, red and green, a poet’s lens and a woman’s eye could be read instead as a pattern of the between or third space of uncertainty and contradiction; “I wish a poem to be technically finished, but spiritually to have a question mark at the end,” wrote Wilkinson in her journal entry for 6 December or thereabout, 1952 (*Tightrope* 110). We might therefore read Wilkinson’s “ands” as amplifying and conjoining rather than as oppositional, keeping in mind Deleuze and Guattari’s image of the rhizome with its “logic of the AND” (Forlini 25) and its acentered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system (21). Wilkinson’s “and,” like the rhizome, is characterized simultaneously and paradoxically by connection and heterogeneity, by stable configurations and the possibility of destabilizing lines of flight (27). For example, although many poems seem to propose a binary — “Black and White” (61), “Theme and Variation” (62), “The Red and the Green” (94-95) — Wilkinson appears more interested in the polysemic play of contradiction and connection and in destabilizing hierarchies and presuppositions than in simple opposition; thus the red blood of her heart is “confused” with the green world in her “new green arteries” and her blood “sings green” (95). Metaphysical questioning is transformed into the literal question marks that repeatedly close her poems. In “One or Three or Two,” a title that, like the privileging of Eve in the reference to “Eve and Adam” in “Lens,” disrupts our sense of order and presuppositions, Wilkinson concludes with a question and sphinx-like riddle: “Or if one joined to one / Makes ONE or three or two?” (79).

Wilkinson, as did P.K. Page, Margaret Avison, Dorothy Livesay, and Phyllis Webb, struggled for recognition of the validity of her specific experience of the world and for a way to negotiate her place within the international modernist movement. For how, among her male mentors, F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, Kildare Dobbs, Louis Dudek, Alan Crawley, and John Sutherland, some of whom were her lovers, could she carve out her own poetic voice and forms? And how best could she inscribe both her pleasure in and her resistance to the role of mother, daughter, house-

wife, ornament, and muse poet? Moreover, how could the descendant of such an establishment family play the part of the bohemian, socialist, or sexual adventurer?

In her poems, prose, and journals, we find Wilkinson frequently querying gender roles and the construction of feminine subjectivity in relation to house and home since, as Marjorie Garber has remarked, “the longstanding symbolic association between houses and women ... is partly an extension of the cult of domesticity and partly a ‘literal’ reading of women’s sexuality as something enclosed and interior” (58). In “Lens,” for example, Wilkinson sets out the “contradictions in a proof” between her weak woman’s eye and her muscled working poetic eye, while in her journals she wishes she were “a woman with female interests, a woman with a genius for making a home and soothing a man, instead of a creature with a passion for hieroglyphics” (29 Oct. 1951, *Tightrope* 96). Amid the postwar cult of domesticity, her dedication to her art must have seemed illicit. Yet, at the same time, although she protests the inequitable situation of women in society, the anomalous position of the female poet in her journals, and, in her poetry, complicates the “and” that joins as well as opposes the *weak* woman’s eye to the *muscled* working eye, she regularly resorts to male personae and voices and cannot be said to feminize or subvert traditional images like the tower or the stairs in any consistent way.

Erasing the Domestic Everyday

Critical attention has focussed on the natural world and the elemental, the metaphysical and the mythic in Wilkinson’s poetry, ignoring the significance of the home and the everyday. Yet, we continually encounter the domestic — particularly in her “Poems from the Copy-Books,” unpublished poems, and autobiographical writings. Although they are often concealed or relegated to a casual, flippant interjection, a pun, or the surprise of the everyday amid the noumenal and green order of her poetics, they perform a vital role in the unfolding of Wilkinson’s poetics and her modernity.⁴ Household objects and the everyday leave recognizable traces, but precisely because of their banality may elude even the attentive reader. Interestingly, A.J.M. Smith, who in the introduction to his 1968 collection of her work observes that her “radiance of mind” “cast[s] often on small, familiar things, or things overlooked before” (xiii), does

not subsequently dwell on these “things” in his discussion of her poetry. Perhaps this is because, as Henri Lefebvre reminds us, while the everyday is the most universal and unique, the most social and individuated, it is also the most obvious and best hidden (*Architecture* 34).⁵

By means of their thorough research into Wilkinson’s manuscripts and unpublished writing, Joan Coldwell and Dean Irvine alert us to A.J.M. Smith’s (and others’) construction of Wilkinson as a metaphysical, cosmopolitan poet. Through his elegiac reading of her life and works and his choice of material to include in *The Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson and A Prose Memoir* (1968), Smith reinforces the view of Wilkinson as a poet in his own metaphysical image, a view that influenced subsequent readers (Introduction xi-xxi). In her account of editing Wilkinson’s journals and autobiography, *The Tigh trope Walker*, Coldwell relates some choice examples of her male mentors’ domestication of Wilkinson. For example, in his evaluation of her manuscript, *The Hangman Ties the Holly*, Kildare Dobbs concludes that “she seems to be no more than humming as she does the dishes” (“Walking” 9). In another example, Earle Birney’s card index of contributors to *Canadian Poetry* characterizes Wilkinson as a Toronto housewife without a university education (9). In his study of the reception and categorization of Wilkinson, “Heresies and Other Poems: An Editorial Postscript to Anne Wilkinson,” Irvine carefully traces the suppression of her leftist, socialist, anti-McCarthy, and anti-religious views — her heresies — by Smith, Kildare Dobbs, and John Sutherland. Poems that refer to the quotidian, banal, and home, and that resonate with a quirky, colloquial voice, were often excluded by others from her publications. According to Irvine, the unruly and strikingly contemporary “Notes on Suburbia” was removed from *The Hangman Ties the Holly* by Dobbs, her editor at Macmillan.⁶ The opening lines reveal how she incorporates and satirizes the suburban everyday:

1. A BETTER HOME FOR THE EXECUTIVE TYPE

In treeless fields, row on row
 Burgeons the ranch-style bungalow.
 Thermapane the windows yawn
 On unexecutive underpants
 Waving amputations at
 Nylons in a neighbour’s lot. (191)⁷

Omissions and suppressions by editors and publishers can be tracked through her manuscripts, published volumes, and publications in small

magazines such as *Contemporary Verse*. Apparently Wilkinson deferred to her male editors and mentors and acquiesced to their suggestions and revisions (Irvine, Introduction 28-35). More difficult to trace is Wilkinson's self-censorship, which seems to manifest itself through the self-deprecatory, flippant tone — a form of distancing and defamiliarization — that permeates her work, suggesting a mind and body not entirely at home. It is also possible that she resorted to the everyday and the conversational precisely in order to mock and discomfit the pretensions of high-brow culture and the oppressive power of capitalism and patriarchal, conservative politics. It is certainly striking that a number of poems that invoke the quotidian and a colloquial, derisive voice were omitted from her published collections, a lacuna that Dean Irvine has corrected and documented in his edition of her poems, *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson, 1924-1961*.

Whereas Henri Lefebvre's concept of the everyday is that it is simply real life, Laurie Langbauer takes up Gayatri Spivak's redefinition of "the everyday, not as lived experience, some 'real' underlying consensus, but as the ongoing deconstruction of that illusion of experience" (Langbauer 33). However, and herein lies a problem for the writer or artist, Lefebvre recognized that "the 'real' is precisely what cannot be represented" (Langbauer 19), and that everyday life eludes metaphor and "the grip of forms" (Lefebvre, *Everyday* 182). In Lefebvre's view "writing can only show an everyday life inscribed and prescribed" (*Everyday* 8) because "everyday insignificance can only become meaningful when transformed into something other than everyday life" (98). Thus, the transformation of the everyday into the mythopoetic and the mythopoetic into the everyday, the juxtaposition of the decorative and the monumental, and the inscription of the everyday through pastiche, quotation, nursery rhymes, and riddles become the ways in which Wilkinson, in the modernist vein of Eliot and Pound, grapples with the "real."⁸

Wilkinson's repeated invocation of witches, a green order, birth, death, amniotic seas of origin, underwater worlds, seasons, colours, trees, flowers, unicorns, lions, tigers, stones, sleep, and time — through a "poet's-eye view" (59) — join representations of home and the everyday to constitute what Gaston Bachelard would call phenomenological reverberations (xxii). Out of this bricolage of elements and carefully contrived dissonance Wilkinson constructs a dwelling place for her poetic imagination. "Who has the cunning to apprehend / Even everyday easy things

/ Like air and wind and a fool / Or the structure and colour of a simple soul?" she queries in "One or three or two" (79), setting out what she perceives to be the poet's task. In her idiosyncratic fashion, Wilkinson alters our common understanding of "everyday, easy things" to involve the intangible and the metaphysical — air, wind, the structure and colour of a soul. Dislocation and unhomeliness are frequently reflected in witticisms, couched in the banal and the everyday, which interrupt the poems, as in "In milk and curd of cheese / Guess the why and whyfore / Of our interval need of peace" ("Letter to My Children" 190).

Symbolic Houses

For Wilkinson, house and home and their interior spaces of doors, stairs, windows, halls, and walls (and daily routines and rituals) serve as tropes of the conflicting pleasure and difficulty of dwelling poetically in the world. In her poetics of space, houses stand as monuments, spectacles, and performances, symbolizing the historical time of family genealogies and ancestries, and furnishing the site of family romance and its unhomely aftermath. They return again and again as uncanny personifications of the sick, traumatized, or dying body, of the erotic and gendered body, and of the psyche. As Steven Harris remarks, "potential sites for an architecture of the everyday begin with the body. Secretive and intimate, it is marked by the routine, the repetitive, and the cyclical; as the locus of desire, it is often home to the transgressive, the perverse, and the abject" ("Everyday" 4).

Wilkinson's symbolic houses paradoxically shelter and disturb the construction of her self and subjectivity as woman and as poet, while also mirroring her struggle with a teleological but skeptical longing for a spiritual, edenic, or originary home, often depicted in images of a maternal, semiotic home: "Home is no longer a place, but a mother, Sukey [nurse-housekeeper], Wilson [chauffeur], even Yee [cook]. Or is it Roches Point?" ("Autobiography," *Tightrope* 181).

The oft-lamented absence of house and home reinforces her posture as a nomadic figure of modernity, a homeless, dislocated self. "I put on my body and go forth / To seek my blood," she writes in "The Red and the Green" (94). Like many other authors, she writes to make a home for herself and mourns her lack of belonging. On 2 November 1954, in a letter to Kildare Dobbs, she complains about the task of writing *Lions in the Way*, her history of the Osler family: "my need to go back to poetry

is like the acute homesickness of someone who has been, for a long time, away from his native land” (Anne Wilkinson Papers). Her desire for home — ancestral, maternal, or originary — is an echo of Heidegger’s concept of it as a “letting-dwell, as a — perhaps even *the* — distinctive kind of building” (Heidegger 111):

I live in only one of innumerable rooms
 When I damp the fire with purposeful breath,
 Stare at ash, sharpen
 My pencil on stone at a cold hearth
 (“I was born a boy, and a maiden, a plant ...” 80)

But Wilkinson is a restless house dweller, and she both yearns for and resists the nostalgia of house and home; indeed, as Douglas Porteous has pointed out, home cannot be understood except in terms of journey (see 387).

The body still goes back
 For of necessity
 It makes strange journeys.
 I, my being,
 Shut the door against return
 And in the attic pack
 One hundred summers
 (“Roches Point” 201)

Here as elsewhere she evokes the correspondence between body, house, and psyche, yoking the everyday together with the metaphysical and elemental into her poetics of space.⁹ The body metamorphoses into the elements of the green world or the interior spaces of the house through whose acres or corners the poetic persona travels and searches.¹⁰ For Wilkinson, the home and the body and their unhomeliness or ugliness reflect a postwar modernity and malaise as well as anxieties over her daily chore as a woman and a poet. In her contradictory presentations of home, homelessness, and the unhomely, Wilkinson exhibits what Anthony Vidler describes in his discussion of the architectural uncanny as a “disquieting slippage between what seems homely and what is definitively unhomely” (ix-x). The tropes of house and domesticity, along with manifestations of the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* — the architectural uncanny — open up “problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence” and become a force “in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the

metropolis" (x).¹¹ The uncanny domestic spaces in Wilkinson's poems may well reflect a "quintessential bourgeois kind of fear" best expressed and experienced "in the privacy of the interior" of the home (Vidler 4). Thus, in "After Reading Kafka," the interiority of home and self metamorphoses into the *unheimlich*, as the wounded speaker, menaced by death and lost love, feels the seeping walls with blistered fingers: "Delicate as ears, fingers fest / (Walls are seeping) / Weeping blisters cry out from their tips, ... Can the wounded walk the voyage back? / Feel their door distinct from a hundred doors?" (67).

In a heresy of home, Anne Wilkinson's poems affirm dislocation and nostalgia (sickness for home); her lost poetic persona positions him- or herself variously as the barred observing eye, a photograph, windows of the house gazing out upon the world, or as a lost speaker under the sea or stone, wandering through the halls of the house, mounting or tumbling down stairs, searching out the secret corners, closing doors behind her. Hence, Wilkinson recognizes how poems and houses, both of which constitute built forms, endeavour to make sense of the world, to imagine and create ways of being at home in a world where we do not feel at home, and to express our alienation and homesickness (see Vidler 7-8). The poem turns into a desired but uneasy dwelling place, replicating the search and longing for home, rather than belonging, being at home.

Four Corners of My World

"For our house is our corner of the world" (Bachelard 4).

Memory is inscribed not only in narratives, but in gestures, in the body's mannerisms. And the narratives are like gestures, related to gestures, places, proper names. The stories speak themselves on their own. They are language honouring the house, and the house serving language. (Lyotard 272)

When Wilkinson opens her prose memoir, "Four Corners of My World," with "three houses dominated our London (Ontario) world: Lornehurst, Eldon, and our own" (*Collected* 181),¹² she draws us into a Bachelardian poetics of domestic space where imagination, intimacy, and subjectivity are mediated by houses redolent with personality and atmosphere, which leave their traces upon a highly sensitive child and "where the trees and the family are temples" ("Summer Acres" 52). Wilkinson's writings instantiate Gaston Bachelard's famous dictum that the "house image would

appear to have become the topography of our intimate being” (xxxvi), and indeed, Bachelard’s *haut bourgeois* background resonates with Wilkinson’s own privileged, Edwardian, and eccentric upbringing within an Upper Canadian moneyed and propertied family of distinguished lineage.¹³ Both Bachelard and Wilkinson spent their childhood in spacious city and country houses whose hidden corners, winding stairs, towers, attics, and pastoral settings invoked nostalgic spaces for reverie. We must remember, therefore, as we wander through Wilkinson’s unhomey, that her abiding sense of house and home and her experience of domestic space and life emerged out of a socially prominent and wealthy milieu, cushioned by a bevy of servants — cooks, gardeners, housekeepers, nannies. Washing dishes and preparing meals — “the daily chore” — were beyond the scope of her experience. Servants carried out domestic chores and minded her children, giving her the time and space and privacy for reading and writing denied most of her contemporary women writers. When, in remembering “houses” and “rooms,” she tries to “abide” within herself (Bachelard xxxvii), the remembered houses and rooms of time past have an affinity with the celebrated and privileged houses that fanned the imaginations of Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot, and Emily Dickinson. As Bachelard so eloquently expressed it, “Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams” (8).

The four corners of Wilkinson’s world are located in four houses of her childhood: London (Eldon House), Toronto (Craigleigh), California (Bambooland), and Roches Point, Lake Simcoe (the Lodge and Lakeside Cottage). Comparing this memoir with the unfinished but more extensive autobiography she edited for *The Tightrope Walker*, Coldwell protests that the memoir domesticates Anne, that the focus shifts from associations with the mother to places and family connections, and that the voice is “that of a well-informed docent leading a tour of historic houses” (“Walking” 17). However, it is important to recognize how, in the memoir, Wilkinson is mapping out the topography of her imagination in the fertile ground of recollected houses and landscapes; house and home are warmly identified with the mother, and the voice initiates us into the house image as a site of intimacy and reverie. Furthermore, the playful substitution of “world” for “room” indicates

the centrality of the correspondence between self and domestic space for Wilkinson.

There are many houses, more than four, in the mansion of her childhood, and in different ways they all assume importance in her poetic imaginary. On the paternal Gibbons side there are the homes in London: Lornehurst, Eldon, their own, and later the “large, dark Victorian house with two acres of old-fashioned garden” in Goderich where her father lay dying (*Tightrope* 199). The sunlit Bambooland in California is symbolic of seemingly carefree, vagabond childhood days spent with her mother and siblings. Then, on the maternal Osler side are the thirteen-acre Osler estate, Craigeleigh, in Rosedale, and her most cherished home, Roches Point on Lake Simcoe. This vast eighty-acre Osler property, originally landscaped by Frederick Omsted of Central Park fame, had been acquired in 1885. Sir Edmund Osler then distributed the summer houses on the property to his children: Beechcroft to his son, the Lodge to Mary, Anne Wilkinson’s mother, where the “lakeside cottage” was later added, and a portion of the property to his other daughter, Annabel, on which she and her husband built “Cottage-in-the-Field.” It is here at Roches Point where Anne wrote most freely, and where a number of poems — “Summer Acres,” “Roches Point,” “Lake Song,” “A Sorrow of Stones” — are discernibly situated. There were also temporary homes in London, New York, and then several Toronto homes in the wealthy Rosedale area during and after marriage to her physician husband, Robert Wilkinson.

In Wilkinson’s spirited history of the Osler family, *Lions in the Way*, which is also narrated through the different family houses, she describes the homes and home lives of family members in lavish detail: Cornwall, England in the early nineteenth century; settler life in Upper Canada in the 1830s, which ranged from a vermin-infested one-room shack to the parish-built Parsonage House in Tecumseh, Ontario; and England again with Sir William Osler’s house in Oxford. The book closes with an “Epilogue,” which is a house biography of Craigeleigh from 1919 to 1924, the period when Anne and her family moved in with Edmund Osler, her grandfather, following her father’s death.

With their anglophile names and anthropomorphic features, these venerable houses are simultaneously sites for reverie and prisons of an extended family life for, as Marilyn Chandler notes in her discussion of houses in American fiction, the “symbolic treatment of houses is not simply a literary fancy[;] . . . houses in their various ways are obviously visible histories

of personal and collective life” (11). In imitation of the European tradition of family estates and manor houses signifying patriarchal lineage, social status and class, the Oslers and the Gibbons were defined by their homes. Successive generations manipulated and were manipulated by the tyranny of the family house, while within the houses, a rigid social order and set routines and conventions were prescribed and perpetuated. In her journal, Wilkinson writes of a visit to her estranged husband:

I got up to leave, saying it was lunch time. [Dr.] Bill Mustard was to arrive shortly and he [her husband] wanted me to stay. I told him I couldn't keep my mother's staff waiting for dinner. (11 Nov. 1951, *Tightrope* 97)

The outside façades of these impressive houses registered a personality and demeanour and thus served as synecdoches of the imposing Osler family; the domestic interiors, decorations, and furnishings supplied an abode for Wilkinson's imagination in the Bachelardian sense and comprised a confusing hybrid of nostalgia, entrapment, longing, and comfort. “It is impossible,” says Lyotard, “to think or write without some façade of a house at least rising up, a phantom, to receive and to make a work of our peregrinations” (275). Throughout her prose — memoir, autobiography, and history — Wilkinson turns the narrative around the pivotal trope of the house, which embodies and personifies the family and family history. In “The Autobiography,” Wilkinson reminisces that Eldon

is a house of many faces, a storeroom with layer upon layer of memories; the open house of childhood and of youth; later the sombre one that contained my aunt and her illness We loved it [Lornehurst] for its size, the dark halls and elaborate ugliness, which didn't seem ugly to us, only strange and exotic . . . a door led to a stair that led to the top of the tower. But the door was locked. Years ago someone had fallen; we did not know who, or if the fall had ended in death. We only knew that it would never be opened again, that the tower, our hearts' desire, was forbidden us. (*Tightrope* 192-93)

Both Freud and Jung had analyzed the representation of the human figure and psyche in terms of a house in dreams. However, highly evocative objects like towers, locked doors, windows, keys, and stairs were not only metaphors of a collective unconscious or repressed desire, but, as Bachelard insisted, the inspiration for reverie and poetry. Wilkinson was certainly well versed in Freud and Jung, and references to uncanny domestic

spaces — locked doors, staircases up to attics or down to cellars, leading to death, dark halls, towers and keys, all captured from childhood memories and resonating with literary echoes — recur, sometimes ironically, throughout her poems, as in “Tower Lullaby”:

Climb, as a child easy with circles
 Spins to the tower
 ...
 The stair is soft;
 ...
 The stair is bare-faced stone;
 So creak on curv-
 Ing rock or leap
 From turf to the top, to the turret.
 Then, panting, lean
 The moment, prop
 It on the parapet
 Before it tumbles
 Over and old again
 Climb again
 Young again
 Sleep. (64-65)

Here is a characteristic Wilkinsonian mix of the archaic, the old world (turret, parapet), the colloquial echoing childhood songs and rhymes, poetic allusions to Tennyson (“The Lady of Shallot”), Browning (“Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”), and Yeats (“The Tower”), the shock of defamiliarization (“over and old again”), and grounding in the visceral and the concrete (“bare-faced stone”). The structure of the poem itself is architectural, replicating the long, narrow tapering tower; inevitably the tower is suggestive of a transcendental signifier, the phallus, the forbidden, and the plunge to death as well as an ascent to the poetic imagination, idealism, and aloofness from the ground world of experience.¹⁴ Wilkinson domesticates an old-world symbol and re-packages it in an imagist mode. Wilkinson’s poetry, like her prose, often revolves around domestic spaces and objects such as windows, towers, doors, and stairs, but their function in the poems as interface between body, psyche, and the material world resonates not only with Wilkinson’s childhood memories but also with mythic and literary echoes, often deployed whimsically, parodically, or self-deprecatorily, a not unfamiliar feminine strategy.

The symbolic domestic space of windows is presented in Wilkinson's description of Craleigh in *Lions in the Way*:

The Craleigh nursery had four barred windows. The two facing south gave us a distant view of street life. We knew our elders lied when they told us how lucky we were, with thirteen acres at our disposal, while the Nanton Avenue children were confined to city sidewalks. But they lied in innocence for they believed that by having too much we had everything. (226-27)

Although barred windows were customary in nurseries, the contradiction represented in the oxymoron of “barred windows” — the view or gaze upon that which is forbidden, the separation between inner protected and privileged space and the plebian but seductive outer space — reverberates with contradictions invoked throughout the poems. As Georg Simmel remarks in his essay on bridges, doors, and windows, “the teleological emotion with respect to the window is directed almost exclusively from inside to outside: it is there for looking out, not for looking in.” The window “creates the connection between the inner and the outer chronically and continually, as it were, by virtue of its transparency,” but the connection is in a “one-sided direction ... just like the limitation upon it to be a path merely for the eye” (68).

In the physiognomy of houses, windows represent eyes and are the means by which those inside engage in surveillance of the public outside world; they are also openings upon the interior of the house, the soul of the body. If, as Freud suggests, windows and doors stand for openings in the body (Chandler 11), the Craleigh windows, as remembered by Wilkinson, offered a contradictory message of a restricted opening. This barred window, view, or eye reflects Wilkinson's recurring image of the lens, the poet's eye view, or the one good eye, and her theme of vision that, following her practice of dwelling in contradiction, is sometimes blurred, sometimes visionary. As Wilkinson reflects in her journal on 31 May 1951, “the artist, as much or more than anyone, is shaken by the bats and witches flapping about in the attic of his solitude.... To see *anything* clearly you have to have seen it with the inaccurate organ of the eye and then again and again when the eye is shut and the imagination supplies the meaning that the eye has missed” (*Tightrope* 88). By means of this paradox of blinded vision or imprisoning privilege, Wilkinson opens up a third space, a space of questions.

Another form of embodiment of houses occurs when death enters and the house as site of family romance, ritual, and heritage turns unhomey. When the family romance is shattered, the house in a form of domestic fallacy mourns and sickens. Home sick. Sick home. Body and buildings are dismembered, fractured, diseased; they jointly weep, seep, blister. Wilkinson remembers the Goderich house as an incarnation of her father's death: "this clumsy brooding house with its twisted pictures of dragons, its elaborate engravings of hell, becomes a symbol of everyone's despair.... We never go back to London at all, except to visit, later, when we are older" (*Tightrope* 199).

London, Ontario is ever after tinged with grey by death, and more than forty years later, she laments her homesickness: "Children transplant happily enough if it is done as a family, intact. But we were uprooted by storm and not bedded back in our own earth. And we are homesick still" (*Tightrope* 200). From the time of relocation to Toronto and Craighigh, Wilkinson speaks continually of her psychic and physical dislocation, of herself as homeless and longing for a home, as a DP (displaced person), a kind of Walter Benjamin rootless modern artist.

Writing Home

During the years of the dissolution of her marriage and her divorce in 1954, when her own family romance disintegrates, the idea/l of the house as sanctuary is undone. And at the same time, the connection between home and writing is undeniable. Writing in her journal after the divorce, Wilkinson insists, "I hate my room, the house, the smell, the endless ugly furniture.... No new poetry for months. I knew I wouldn't write in this house" (17 Dec. 1951 and 24 Apr. 1952, *Tightrope* 99). A few months later, on 7 July 1952, she observes from the Lodge at Roches Point,

Caged in a bedroom.... Somehow, somewhere, I will find a house where I can grow and put down roots — or, better still, slip beyond the point of needing my own possessions, garden.... I think that every poem I've written in the last year has had the word 'home' in it at least once. A displaced person must be acutely conscious of the psychological dangers. (*Tightrope* 106).

Yet the unease occasioned by her experience of the *unheimlich*, coiled wormlike within the homeplace, also inspires and shapes her poetry, fur-

nishing it with wit and ironic distance. And it is during these difficult years that she began writing in earnest, perturbed by an escalating apprehension of the unhomey as reflected in the closing lines of “A Folk Tale: With a Warning to Lovers”: “On the home sweet hearth of hell” (56). In her journal she ponders the effects of the unhomey on her writing: “during the last year I have moved away from my old mystical moods of identification with earth and animals and plants to a more human situation But, at odd moments, I am homesick, as an adolescent mourns her childhood, for the peaceful intoxication of fusion with the green growing world, although I came to see it as a dead end, an escape from being a person” (23 July 1951, *Tightrope* 93). Thus, writing about Roches Point in “Summer Acres,” she concedes that, although “My eyes are wired to the willow / . . . My ears are tied to the tattle of water, ” “Here, in my body’s home my heart dyes red” (51, 52).

Although she could not write in *that* house (4 Cluny Drive), through her writing she continually seeks to build a habitable space. From the safe space of Roches Point, she advises herself, “Plan a long poem. Keep notebook of ideas and lines. Decide on theme then play the variations, each thing going a step further from the original; conclude by bringing the whole thing [like the voyaging Ulysses] *home*” (16 June 1951, *Tightrope* 89).¹⁵ She had attempted to construct a mythopoetic, elemental world (Irvine “A Poetics”) out of a green order with exotic and mythical creatures, bringing the foreign and the monstrous into the domestic, and letting them clash — lions, tigers, unicorns — in the hope of giving birth to a home in the world. Her domestication of mythical, magical, exotic *foreign* creatures — the other — and their reincarnation into the everyday indicate a subversion of master narratives and authoritative voices. In the poem “Unicorn,” when the speaker opens the “black door” and “shook the rain/From my good eye,” the unicorn runs “down [her] tumbling stair” (133). In another (unpublished) fragment from the notebooks, she pushes the juxtaposition of the everyday and the exotic through playful images, a domestic voice, and sexual innuendo and puns (trunk, key) further into flippancy, when an “elephant” lover visits her home, amuses her children, but confounds her with his “trunk”:

An elephant came to stay with us
 For a week or two
 The children were glad to see him
 But

I didn't know what to do with his trunk.
 When I murmured "Shall I unpack for you?"
 He blushed (it turns an elephant blue)
 Replying in sorrow
 "Perhaps tomorrow
 I'll find the key." (164)

Frequently her search for a primaeval home signifies an amniotic womb world or a maternal body in an underwater world. Thus, each section of "Four Corners of My World" begins with the association of Wilkinson's mother with the house in question (Coldwell, Introduction xi). In "Lake Song," her first love poem (13 July 1948, *Tightrope* 18), she concludes, "The arms of my lover will carry me home to the sea" (63). In "Amphibian Shores" she calls from the bottom of the sea: "We cry 'A house!' choke, / A thatch of sea-weed is green-growing roof" (175). In "The Great Winds," she narrates, "Once upon a briny while ago / The sea was home" (69).

Wilkinson represents her sense of self in terms of mental and physical dislocation or homelessness, "a naked snail lost without a towering shell" (*Tightrope* 95). At times, this body/house is ridden with guilt (at her divorce, etc.), anxiety, and flayed by malady; at other times, gleeful, erotic, and rooted in earth, air, water, fire; it is subjected to dissection, drowning, disfigurement, dismemberment, metamorphosis, and reincarnation: "I'd love this body more / If graved in rigid wood" ("Still Life" 60); "Here at my door I swing between obsessions: / Hall by day, corridor by night. / I am obsessed with exits ... tear my foot ... but if it bleeds / I do not know" ("After Reading Kafka," 65-67); "I was a witch and I could be / Bird or leaf / Or branch and bark of tree" ("Nature Be Damned" 121); "Her coral remnants lie / Where fishes keep their watch by night" ("Virginia Woolf" 113); "Down you dive / ... / And quick with jumping silver knife / You slit my tail, that we may love / Without impediment" ("Fishwife" 197); "Skull's skin is paper thin / Migraine is seeping in" ("Summer Storm" 163). The body, however, seems an unhomely home, for Wilkinson continually suffered and wrote about illness — hers, her children's, her extended family's. Metaphysical maladies. Sick home. Home sick. In her prose and poetry, the ailing psyche and the disease-stricken body are manifested in the walls and rooms of the house, which is represented as a working, organic body. As she remarks with relief in her journal on 4 February 1948, "the

hustle and bustle of acute illness subsides into convalescence. It is in the house itself, in the walls, floating down from ceilings and rising from floors" (*Tightrope* 6). In "After Reading Kafka," she transmits a Kafkaesque malaise onto the door, hall, and walls of the house: "Signal / If you touch an opening in the line to home! / Delicate as ears, fingers fest / (Walls are seeping) / Weeping blisters cry out from their tips" (67). The house, like the body, is traumatized.

Unlike Emily Dickinson, whose persona "I" repeatedly spoke from a concealed position, and whom Wilkinson admired,¹⁶ Anne Wilkinson's poetic self is nomadic, a time-space traveller, swimming under the sea, tumbling down stairs, rooting in gardens, a self who crosses genders and assumes multiple voices and masks: puritan, Kafka, boy, maiden, plant, witch, tightrope walker, mermaid, Virginia Woolf, to name a few.

In one of the early (1946) notebook poems, "Claustrophobia," omitted from the 1968 *Collected Poems*, the room transforms into an analogy of the poet's skull, body, psyche, and world. It seems to be a migraine poem, like "Summer Storm" (163) quoted above, and the later "Dissection": "We crawl though craniums, stare / Beneath the bone at spasms ... / And while we squint to focus microscopes, / Dissect each bleeding head, / Sun bursts in splendour from the attic skull" (71).¹⁷ The room takes on the topography of a disturbed, entrapped inner being and an ailing body, with the four walls manifesting a quaternity she expresses through the four elements of wind, air, water, and earth, four corners, and four houses.¹⁸ The blind window, like the "barred windows" described earlier, once again presents the poet's-eye view, positioned here in a liminal domestic space between inside and out and between mind and world, as limited, inward gazing, self-deceiving, and blind but also as visionary. Imprisoned in this enclosed space, which is also that of the body and mind, the subject's position is one of immobility:

I do not know if I can move
 Inside this little room.
 It has four walls,
 Four seem enough
 But they enclose a square
 And any way I walk
 Is equi-distant there.

It has a blind square window
 With an endless view
 Of four square walls —
 I beat my head
 To see if pain's the clue. (169)

Oddly, earlier variants of the last two lines offer more lyrical and less pedestrian concluding images: for example, “Walls without / A shadow for a clue”; “Walls and a window / No shadow for a clue”; “Walls within / A room devoid of view” (*Heresies* 294). Why did Wilkinson then settle for the less evocative, more colloquial, and literal ending? Was it a desire to ground the poem even further in the everyday and the body? Was this another of her habitual turns to flippancy and mockery? Or was it an attempt to escape from the terrors of the uncanny within home and self?

It may be that, as Lyotard suggests, “the domestic world does not cease to operate on our passibility to writing, right up to the disaster of the houses Thought cannot want its house. But the house haunts it” (277). It may be that the everyday and the home provided the scaffolding, but also the nemesis for Wilkinson’s own life and her poetry, for, as her poems and autobiographical works indicate, she was haunted by the idea of home and its ambivalent effects upon her writing.

NOTES

¹ For his generosity in showing me the manuscript of *Heresies*, sharing ideas and materials on Anne Wilkinson, and sending me poems and information on the domestic in Anne Wilkinson, I am indebted to Dean Irvine. This paper would not have been possible without his help. I am also grateful to Chiara Briganti, who is working with me on a project on domestic space, Barbara Godard for her invaluable support and comments, and Wendy Thompson for her excellent assistance. For permission to quote from Anne Wilkinson’s Papers, I thank the Special Collections of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Room at the University of Toronto. An oral version of this paper was presented at the Wider Boundaries of Daring Conference at the University of Windsor, 2001.

Quotations of Wilkinson’s poems are from *Heresies*, unless indicated otherwise.

² Note how Eve precedes Adam.

³ See, for example, Lecker, Barbour, and Keitner.

⁴ I like Homi Bhabha’s take on Freud’s unhomely, which he perceives as capturing “something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhalloved place . . . : the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (445).

⁵ Feminist theorists have pointed out contradictions in Lefebvre's comments on women and the everyday. Mary McLeod notes that although Lefebvre admits that the everyday weighs heaviest on women, it also provides them realms for fantasy, desire, rebellion and assertion (McLeod 18). Laurie Langbauer observes that because of their ambiguous position in everyday life, Lefebvre felt that women were incapable of understanding it (21).

⁶ Dean Irvine, email to the author, 14 June 2001.

⁷ In a letter to Wilkinson on 16 February 1955, Louis Dudek, however, writes that her not-to-be-published poems are all excellent, more or less crazy, and that he would run "Suburbia" right away (in *CTV/N*) if she were not so possessive about them (Anne Wilkinson Papers).

⁸ See Lisa Fiorindi, "Into the 'Curd and Why of Memory': The Use and Subversion of the Nursery Rhyme in the Poetry of Anne Wilkinson," a paper presented at *Wider Boundaries of Daring* Conference, University of Windsor, 2001.

⁹ See Dean Irvine's description:

Her imaginal "attic" is filled with both elemental and memorial images; it is an imaginal house, a dwelling-place for archetypal images of her family's lived body and world. But the attic is moreover resonant of death: it is a place where relics of past lives and of dead relatives are stored ... [and it] is the home of her "elemental being" — a corner of her family's life, and death, detached from her "body's home." ("A Poetics" 4)

¹⁰ For example, "stanza" is Italian for room. Frederic Jameson, in thinking about built space as a kind of language, deliberates whether "words of built space, or at least its substantives, would seem to be rooms, categories which are syntactically or syncategorematically related and articulated by the various spatial verbs and adverbs — corridors, doorways and staircases, for example, modified in turn by adjectives in the form of paint and furnishings, decoration and ornament These 'sentences' — if that indeed is what a building can be said to 'be' — are read by readers whose bodies fill the various shifter-slots and subject-positions; while the larger text into which such units are inserted can be assigned to the text-grammar of the urban" (261).

¹¹ Vidler also goes onto to say that "the uncanny has been interpreted as a dominant constituent of modern nostalgia, with a corresponding spatiality that touches all aspects of social life" (x).

¹² This fragment was published in *Tamarack Review* in 1961 and reprinted in Smith, 1968 and Coldwell, 1990.

¹³ Her uncle was Sir William Osler, the famous physician, her grandfather, Sir Edmund Osler, was the President of the Dominion Bank, Member of Parliament, and a patron of the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

¹⁴ Bettina Knapp suggests that Jung's tower is an architectural metaphor for an inner psychic climate (vi).

¹⁵ It is interesting that Wilkinson identifies with voyaging Ulysses rather than with Penelope at home, weaving and waiting. I am grateful to Barbara Godard for this insight.

¹⁶ See Diana Fuss for a discussion of Emily Dickinson's poetics of the home and the interior in "Interior Chambers: The Emily Dickinson Homestead."

¹⁷ An early variation is "bloody skull"; it is interesting to note that she brings in the house image to render her phrase more tangible and concrete (219).

¹⁸ See Coldwell, "Wilkinson, Anne," and Irvine, "A Poetics," for an analysis of Wilkinson's quaternity.

WORKS CITED

- Anne Wilkinson Papers. Ms. 29. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. U of Toronto.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. M. Jolas. Boston: Beacon, 1994.
- Barbour, Douglas. "Day Thoughts on Anne Wilkinson's Poetry." *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*. Ed. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli. Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986. 179-90.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "The World and the Home." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, Ellen Shohat. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 445-55.
- Chandler, Marilyn R. *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.
- Coldwell, Joan. Introduction. *The Tighrope Walker: Autobiographical Writings of Anne Wilkinson*. Ed. Coldwell. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992. vii-xvii.
- . "Walking the Tighrope with Anne Wilkinson." *Editing Women*. Ed. Ann M. Hutchison. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998. 3-25.
- . "Wilkinson, Anne." *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1983. 831-32.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Forlini, Stefania. "Learning to Read Literary Machines." Unpublished essay, 2002.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1955. 17: 217-52.
- Fuss, Diana. "Interior Chambers: The Emily Dickinson Homestead." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. 10.5 (1998): 1-46.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses*. New York: Pantheon, 2000.
- Harris, Steven. "Everyday Architecture." *Architecture of the Everyday*. Ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke. New York: Princeton Architectural P, 1996. 1-8.
- Heidegger, Martin. "... Poetically Man Dwells..." *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. London: Routledge, 1997. 109-19.
- Irvine, Dean. "A Poetics of the Elemental Imagination: Anne Wilkinson's Poetry and Autobiographical Writings." M.A. Thesis. U of Calgary, 1996.
- . "Heresies and Other Poems: An Editorial Postscript to Wilkinson." ACCUTE Annual Conference, Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities. Université Laval, May 2001.
- . Introduction. *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson, 1924-1961*. Ed. Dean Irvine. Montreal: Signal, 2003. 19-47.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Is Space Political?" *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. London: Routledge, 1997. 255-69.
- Keitner, Wendy. "Canadian Women Poets and the Syndrome of the Female Man: A Note on the Poetry of Audrey Alexandra Brown and Anne Wilkinson." *Room of One's Own* 8.4 (1984): 76-81.
- Knapp, Bettina L. *Archetype, Architecture, and the Writer*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- Langbauer, Laurie. *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999.
- Lecker, Robert. "Better Quick than Dead: Anne Wilkinson's Poetry," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 3.1 (1978): 35-46.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Everyday Life and the Modern World*. Trans. Sacha Rabinovitch. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

- . "The Everyday and Everydayness." *Architecture of the Everyday*. Ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke. New York: Princeton Architectural P, 1997. 32-37.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. "Domus and Megalopolis." *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. London: Routledge, 1997. 271-79.
- McLeod, Mary. "Henri Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction." *Architecture of the Everyday*. Ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke. New York: Princeton Architectural P, 1997. 9-29.
- Porteous, J. Douglas. "Home: the Territorial Core." *Geographical Review* 66.4 (1976): 383-90.
- Reed, Christopher, ed. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Simmel, Georg. "Bridge and Door." *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. London: Routledge, 1997. 66-69.
- Smith, A.J.M. Introduction. *The Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson and A Prose Memoir*. Ed. A.J.M. Smith. Toronto: Macmillan, 1968. xiii-xxi.
- Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge: MIT, 1996.
- Wilkinson, Anne. *The Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson and A Prose Memoir*. Ed. A.J.M. Smith. Toronto: Macmillan, 1968.
- . *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson, 1924-1961*. Ed. Dean Irvine. Montreal: Signal, 2003.
- . *Lions in the Way: A Discursive History of the Oslers*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1956.
- . *The Poetry of Anne Wilkinson and A Prose Memoir*. Ed. Joan Coldwell. Toronto: Exile, 1990.
- . *The Tightrope Walker: Autobiographical Writings of Anne Wilkinson*. Ed. Joan Coldwell. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991.