

Anne Ridler (1912–2001), 16 September 2016
(Vivian Ridler 1913–2009)

Michael Schmidt

On 9 December 1969, Anne Ridler wrote to me, ‘Dear Mr Schmidt, Thank you for your letter about the new Carcanet venture. I shall be interested to see the first pamphlets, and I enclose my two guinea subscription. Why should you want to codify yourselves with a group name? I hope you won’t – and certainly not such a name as *vividist*...’

She was always reluctant to have poetry classified:

I think any tendency to treat work as part of a category, such as Christian writing, involves one in rather an irreverent approach, an approach that is not really concerned with Poetry as Poetry but with some particular kind of belief. People have tended to label me a Christian Poet, as in the early days they tended to approach the work as that of a woman poet, whereas one only wanted to be judged as a poet.

Her counselling me on ‘vividist’ was the first time Anne Ridler gave me good advice. Not long after I came to Stanley Road for tea and met Anne and Vivian. We became friendly, though it was some years before we became friends. She started contributing to *PN Review* in 1985, having associated herself with CRISIS FOR CRANMER AND KING JAMES, PNR 13, in 1980, when she wrote,

The New English Bible was not intended to be a substitute for the Authorised Version, but an aid to understanding for those who needed it, as well as a text for scholars. I was a member for some years of the literary panel working on the Old Testament, and I certainly never thought that the new version would be used in place of the old – I should have been dismayed had I thought so....

Her contributions to *PN Review* included her talk ‘On Translating Opera’, where she dwells so illuminatingly on the central challenge of getting vowel values right – thinking always of the singer – a lesson I think Tony Harrison, translating the Janacek libretti, may have learned from, or with, her.

Anne translated two operas by Cavalli and one by Cesti for Jane Glover; Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* for the English National Opera and his *Return of Ulysses* for Kent Opera; Handel’s *Agrippina* for Kent Opera; and Cavalli’s *Calisto* for the English National Opera Workshop. Her original libretti are: *The Departure*, *The Jesse Tree*, and *The King of the Golden River* for Elizabeth Maconchy; and *The Lambton Worm* for Robert Sherlaw Johnson.

‘Opera,’ she writes,

grows from the seed of the word. Renaissance theorists were in no doubt about that, and they based their arguments on Plato [...] Monteverdi, the greatest of early opera composers, found it so necessary to have words that inspired him, that he objected to a libretto which used winds as characters, writing to his patron: ‘How, dear sir, since winds do not speak, shall I be able to imitate their speech? And how, by such means, shall I be able to move the passions?’

Opera provides the librettist and translator with unusual freedoms:

because of the distancing power of music, the librettist can take more risks than the playwright: there are, indeed, great attractions for a poet nowadays in this medium, which provides, as W. H. Auden pointed out, almost his only remaining opportunity of attempting the high style. Moreover, it opens to a translator a variety of rhymes and metres which could no longer be used in lyrics where he speaks with his own voice.

But she did not get carried away. The translator is a craftsman:

Libretto-translating – even to some extent libretto-creating – is a kind of verbal joinery, using the word in no derogatory sense; and as with the craft of the typographer, its aim is generally to be unobtrusive. It used to be considered bad form among typographers to put their name to their work; similarly perhaps the translator should not repine if his name is the first to be cut from the list of credits.

That phrase, ‘The craft of the typographer’ introduces Vivian Ridler. He was a constant presence for her, she addresses him or he is mutely present as she sees and makes; and he was devoted to her and her work not merely as a reader but as an interpreter through print. I particularly love her little poem ‘Some Time After’ (p. 179) which is tender and wise:

Where are the poems gone, of our first days?
 Locked on the page
Where we for ever learn our first embrace.
 Love come of age
Takes words as said, but never takes for granted
 His holy luck, his pledge
That what is truly loved is truly known.
 Now in that knowledge
Love unillusioned is not love disenchanted.

Anne contributed wonderful poems to my magazine, including one of her last, a lasting favourite, ‘Villanelle for the Colour-Conscious’; and she also wrote a memorable essay on George Herbert, one on Kathleen Raine, her fascinating memoir about working with T. S. Eliot whose assistant at Faber she was for several years, and two interviews, one with Grevel Lindop, the other with Nicola Simpson.

What were her duties when she joined Faber and Faber in 1935? She was tasked with seeing the *Criterion* assembled and printed. She monitored the magazine's slush pile. She copy-edited and reported on manuscripts to the weekly Faber Book Committee. Sometimes she took dictation though Eliot generally wrote his own letters, standing at a lectern.

Vivian, who did book design for Faber, met Eliot's secretary Anne Bradby, and they married in 1938. They endured the Blitz in London; they were bombed out of their first flat. Their union was blessed with four children, Benedict, Colin, Jane, Kate.

In 1994 Anne's and my closer friendship came about with the publication of her *Collected Poems*, A beautiful John Piper image appeared on the cover of the paperback, based on one of the *Jesse Tree* designs he made for her opera. By then I visited her and Vivian here at Stanley Road for tea from time to time, and my children came on occasion and played in the garden.

My sharpest later memory of her is from 1999. I was driving her and perhaps Elizabeth Jennings to the funeral of Joy Scovell whose work Anne had introduced to me. Scovell, a quiet, unassuming woman, is one of the keenest and finest writers of her generation. A just recognition still awaits her. Almost my greatest debt to Anne is the introduction to her.

Anne spent much of the ride to the funeral calmly advocating the better work of Kathleen Raine, with whose themes and poems I felt a certain impatience. Anne, and Elizabeth too, made a case, with quotations from memory. Anne was generous always, always an advocate. If there was nothing positive to be said, then best say nothing. Soon after Joy Scovell's funeral she wrote a little essay on Raine for *PN Review*, saying, among other things,

I as a poet a few years younger remember with gratitude her critical encouragement, justly admonishing me not to burden my poem with explanations of a meaning that should be implicit: 'One must trust one's medium.' But most of all I honour and give thanks for a visionary poet who has always been true to her vision – the vision summed up in the epigraph to *On a Deserted Shore*: 'Anima est ubi amat, non ubi animat'; the soul is not where we live but where we love. Or, to quote one of her memorable lines: 'Love knows the face that each soul turns towards heaven.'

Anne quotes Raine's words about the blessed dead: 'They hear as music what we feel as pain', and adds, 'Such lines, once read, remain a permanent part of the furniture of our minds.'

So many of the later poems seem to live in this house and garden, or indeed to grow here:
Hellebore, Heliotropes – and Snakehead Fritillaries, one of her favourites among her poems:

Some seedlings shoulder the earth away
Like Milton's lion plunging to get free,
Demanding notice. Delicate rare fritillary,
You enter creeping, like the snake
You're named for, and lay your ear to the ground....

Her very favourite of her poems was the long elegiac 'A Matter of Life and Death' which opens,

I did not see the iris move,
I did not feel the unfurling of my love.

This was the sequence of the flower:
First the leaf from which the bud would swell,
No prison, but a cell,
A rolled rainbow;
Then the sheath that enclosed the blow
Pale and close
Giving no hint of the blaze within,
A tender skin with violet vein.
Then the first unfurling petal
As if a hand that held a jewel
Curled back a finger, let the light wink
Narrowly through the chink,
Or like the rays before the sunrise
Promising glory. [...]

A third favourite – I know because I asked her to and she chose three poems to essentialise her work – was 'The Freezing Rose'.

Anne was a wonderful poet, a fine anthologist, editor and critic. She was of course also, with Vivian, a loving parent, a person whose Christian goodness in every sense animates her work and her life. I want to end with her 'Villanelle for the Colour-Conscious', a late poem which expresses her sense of the sacramental nature of achieved poetry, how it gathers all of us with our very different personal luggage into the same vehicle and takes us on the same journey so that we move from the separateness of 'The world you see is not the same as mine' to a different place, 'The world you see should be the same as mine,' and finally, a synthesis. Here is that sacramental villanelle, written in this house twenty years ago, in which language (if we let it) draws us out of ourselves into a shared space.

**Villanelle for the Colour-Conscious
for Bent and Mary Juel-Jensen**

The world you see is not the same as mine,
Hue once meant *form*: you shape it differently,
And yet we both describe the same design.

The rainbow's tints are seven and not nine –
We need more terms to apportion what we see;
The choice you make is not the same as mine.

Travelling through the spectrum, we assign
The frontiers differently: what's green to me
Looks grey to you. Yet it's the same design.

Colour of flesh was once incarnadine;
Since Shakespeare, that's blood-red. In poetry
The world you see should be the same as mine.

Cyan, the Greek for dark-blue, we assign
To greenish-blue. Do we then disagree?
Or rather both describe the same design?

Some words arranged in order on a line
Are prose to one, to another, poetry.
The world you see is not the same as mine,
And yet we both describe the same design.