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## SANCTUARY IN PORCELAIN

A NOTE AS TO ELINOR WYLIE

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

**I**N ANY regarding of the career of Elinor Wylie, it is most human to ask, What would she have done next? The question is profitless, alike in that it can have no answer and in that even if the answer were in some miraculous way, provided it would be to us of no more benefit than are last week's radio programs. With that peculiar sort of logic which distinguishes men from the higher apes as decisively as from the lower angels, one is drawn here to guess futilely at the unknowable, very much as Elinor Wylie herself was drawn to guess, through two whole novels, at the fine things which a spared Shelley would have done after 1822.

With Elinor Wylie the poet—I mean, with the poet who wrote in verse—I plan no traffic. I can find in her verses nothing very remarkable, but then that has for many years been my attitude toward everyone's verses, all the long way from Hesiod's and Pindar's to Mr. Edgar Guest's and my own. The tale runs otherwise as concerns that more urbane, that more prismatic, and in brief that so much more poetic poetry which, after the fashion of reformed and civilised poets, Elinor Wylie wrote in prose form. To no other woman save only Helen of Troy, and that unaccountable person who imprudently married me have I been indebted for more of fond delight and of unanswered surmise.

For I had the good luck to rank, along with Sinclair Lewis and Carl Van Vechten, as one of the "discoverers" of "Jennifer Lorn," in the autumn of 1923, and to commend this story in the public prints (according to the testimony of my scrap-books) as "compact of color and legerity and glitter." I

find also that through the courtesy of Elinor Wylie's publishers I was likewise enabled at this time to praise in innumerable advertisements "the wistful humors and the fine prose" of "Jennifer Lorn." Then it was later my fortune to be, I think, the only unsilent admirer of "The Venetian Glass Nephew," in the days when Elinor Wylie was dreeing the inevitable weird of every author who has scored an unlooked-for triumph in a more or less new vein—which is, of course, to hear that the successful book's successor is nothing like so good. 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.

Much changes, however, both within and about us, during the course of seven years. And since time, like an insane thief, robs all of all grief and disappointment eventually, there is now no hurt in conceding that "The Orphan Angel," when it was published in 1926, affected me very much as, in the cliché at least, does a bucket of cold water full in the face. "The Orphan Angel" really did appear a most inane wasting of wood pulp even for the Book of the Month Club to be inflicting upon its broken-spirited customers. I raged before "The Orphan Angel." I declared, as I still think, that the writing of "The Orphan Angel" was one of the most gloomy errors in all literary history. Yet out of an honest desire to avoid overstatement, I must humbly confess that, after six most conscientious onslaughts, I have not ever been able to read "The Orphan Angel"; and so perhaps speak upon insufficient information.

When "Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard" appeared in 1928, then before the dreadful forerunning rumor that yet again Elinor Wylie had rescued Shelley from the Mediterranean the hearts of the merely rational sank. Yet I at least read tentatively; and was thus allured into a peace without victory. These pleasant and innocuous doings at Lyonesse and Gravelow by no means revealed the Elinor Wylie of her first two romances; but that reflection was drowned, as this pertinacious woman simply would not permit Percy

Bysshe Shelley to be drowned upon any terms, in the glad relief of noting that, even so, in this pensive galamatias of raspberries and Greek grammars and cream buns was nowhere involved the planet-struck Elinor Wylie of her third romance. In fine, one found all rather more than satisfying, in a relatively unimportant fashion; and common-sense did not demand over much of an author convalescing from a seizure so alarming as had been manifested in "The Orphan Angel." It is upon her fifth story, I said, that the career of Elinor Wylie will pivot. Then came the news of her death and the knowledge that there would be no fifth story. Her progress stayed forever inconclusive. God alone, if one dare cite an authority so far out of touch with current literature, can say what Elinor Wylie would have done next.

I elect to believe that had more of life been granted to her she would have gone on to write yet other books as pre-eminent in their own ornate way as are "Jennifer Lorn" and "The Venetian Glass Nephew." I confess that my conviction here is not quite so strong as it is valueless. One cannot wholly put out of mind how very, very freely, in that disastrous "Orphan Angel," 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 bathos where her avowed aim was seraphic beauty—and all this too in connection with an unbridled incapacity for self-criticism. Elinor Wylie honestly believed, as but too many of her friends learned at the cost of all friendship, that "The Orphan Angel" was an excellent fantasy made up of her finest endeavors.

Yet that delusion hardly matters now. One or two other authors have been known to extend the imperfections of their writing into their evaluations of it; and oblivion has triumphed where the Mediterranean failed. The dead past has swallowed tranquilly its dead, among whom I estimate to be that not ever really alive "Orphan Angel"; and Elinor Wylie has bequeathed to us at least two books concerning which there can be no dispute by the intelligent.

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

For there are, to my finding, two kinds of romance. They differ in their causes, in their materials, and in their purposes: they agree but as to the desirability of embellishing the course of human life as men actually do live it. There is that major romance which gilds actuality with the gold of a highly superior sun, as opposed to that minor romance over which one is tempted to say, the moon presides, to ensorcel all with a wizardry of amiably prevaricating shadows and with vivid patterns of silver. I must here mix metaphors by admitting that sometimes this is only German silver, of no great intrinsic worth: but the patterns are very often exquisite.

There is, I mean, the normal, the wholesome, the really childlike kind of romance in which the writer joyously accepts this world and the broad flowering ways of human life, but enlivens each with more propitious and with more picturesque happenings than occur in the ratio he depicts. Thus Scott worked, as Dumas did after him, in a pleased quest of the improbable. These titans we may reasonably acclaim the supreme masters in this kind of romance writing. And they embellished human life because they loved it. They adorned it with superb adventures in precisely that frame of mind in which the favored lover brings jewels to his mistress. They wrote, in short, as happy persons alone may write in a complacent glow of prosperity. Both of them performed their great labors in days of semi-fabulous success and material well-being, when the masters of Abbotford and of the Château de Monte Cristo held each his princely court, in entire financial stability, and went with critical fanfares among applauding underlings. Yet a little later, in the more prosaic presence of bankruptcy, that

necromancy which had summoned up Rob Roy could evoke but Count Robert of Paris, and across the forsaken battle fields of the three musketeers the Whites and the Blues wavered like paralytic phantoms. When once life had proved unlovable, and misfortune had touched these mages heavily, it would seem that their magic failed. When Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas could no longer love life with complete confidence, and with a boisterous optimism as to all life's orderings, then they could write of life but haltingly. One is tempted to infer that the major romance is a tropic growth which does not thrive in the inclement zones of fortune. It is a branch of literature to which, in any case, do not belong "Jennifer Lorn" and "The Venetian Glass Nephew."

For there is, to the other side, that quite different kind of romance which embellishes life because the writer has found life to be unendurably ugly. It embellishes life very much as one might cover the face of a leper. The origin of all such romance writing is thus appreciably removed from being love, in that if it be not entirely hate it is, at mildest, aversion. It demands, with Baudelaire, the inaccessible places and strange adorers: with Flaubert it seeks for new perfumes, for vaster flowers, and for pleasures not ever before attained. Its goals are not of this world. It does not hunt the improbable: it evokes in desperation that which it over well knows to be impossible.

We call this—dully enough—"the literature of escape." Brisk gentlemen rather more enamored of a striking phrase than of strict veracity have even been known to commend it as the literature of something like blasphemy. For it is, say these tremendous fellows, a literature composed by persons almost equally tremendous who have found the globe they inhabit and the unappreciative mammals about them to be the productions of a most inferior and ill inspired Author. Its poetry is thus in exact truth a criticism of life, a criticism of the stout old slashing Edinburgh Review school, which begins with the time-hallowed formula "This will never do!"

It is a poetry—a “making”—which thereafter goes on to set a better example (for the instruction of a no doubt properly impressed Providence) by creating a really acceptable sort of world exhilarated by congenial inhabitants. Thus say these godlings, where we calmer communicants incline to rather less of a pother, in the light of our private knowledge that books after all are only books, even if the Trinity have much time for reading.

We may grant, nevertheless, that this kind of romance writing is a poetry—a “making”—to which the unhappy contribute. They contribute so widely and so very variously that where a wastrel like Marlowe from out of his pot-house squalor may augment this branch of literature with a “Hero and Leander,” a restrained schoolmaster like Charles L. Dodgson, from out of the forlorn stuffiness of that atmosphere which is thought most suitably to develop the minds of the young, will bring forth an “Alice in Wonderland.” We may grant also that this is a branch of literature to which, through plain enough reasons, do belong “Jennifer Lorn” and “The Venetian Glass Nephew.”

I must here of necessity approach to matters which as yet stay delicate. It suffices to remark that the corporal life of Elinor Wylie was but too often at odds with her circumstances. The nature of this very beautiful and tragic woman was not ever in all adapted to that makeshift world in which perforce moved her superb body. She had found, after marrying several of them, that this world was over full of disappointments. 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.

Into this quaint and brittle sanctuary of Elinor Wylie’s creation neither the spirit nor the affections, or any other hu-

man plague, may enter, for the reason that there is in this sparkling place no human heart. 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. A few of them may even pretend to die, with unruffled decorum. Their little porcelain tongues lend to their speaking a light stiffness whensoever these fine manikins converse. They converse too in their own idiom, for the vernacular of this point-device land is an ever-courteous blending of ironic epigram and neat periods and apt literary allusions. Yet a discerning audience will watch all with the connoisseur's calm approval. For this, we know, is but a make-believe land of animated figurines, wherein not lust nor death, not poverty nor bankrupt love, but the cool joys of virtuosity, and of finesse, and of each tiny triumph in phrase-making, are the sole serious matters.

For one, I still delight in the wistful humors and the fine prose of this little land: I commend to you, as I said at outset, the color and the legerity and the glitter of this sanctuary against the rude real. Yet I am far from declaring that oncoming ages will forever treasure these books. For tastes change: and in art also, we incline to forget our benefactors. It is on the cards that very few, and perhaps none, of our descendants may care to travel with Jennifer Lorn all the exotic long way of her journeying (even from the spring sunlight of Devonshire to the crimson pillows of the unvirtuous Banou's bed) or to advance happily with Rosalba Berni from the classical summer-house at Altachieri into the fires of the smelting furnace at Sèvres. Posterity, I admit, may forget both of these books. But I add that posterity will thus acquire a quite valid claim on our pity.