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An Interview with Sylvia Wilkinson

Jane Vance

In lively exchanges at the second University of Kentucky Women Writers Conference in April 1980, novelist Sylvia Wilkinson often disagreed with fellow participant Tillie Olsen on the issue of choice in a writer's life, particularly for a woman writer. Olsen, both at the conference and in her 1978 book, Silences, maintained an artist's right to fulfill traditional roles while practicing and perfecting her/his art, whereas Wilkinson sees choices and eliminations as necessary. She feels she can now write novels because early in her career she made conscious decisions which enabled her to do so. In the following interview she explains the bases of her crucial choices, and discusses the sources of her fiction.

Sylvia Wilkinson's novels, about women of intense sensibilities and deeply felt connections to the earth, grow out of her rural Southern background and bring to life the landscape of the North Carolina Piedmont. She was born in Durham in 1940, and began writing her first novel, Moss on the North Side (1966), when she was twelve years old. She continued work on it at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where Randall Jarrell called her "the best prose writer I have ever got to teach." After earning an M.F.A. at Hollins College under Louis D. Rubin, Jr., she was awarded a Eugene Saxton Trust grant to complete Moss. Both it and her second novel, A Killing Frost (1967), are bildungsromans in which the protagonists come to terms with the alienation from the land that accompanies their maturing sexuality. She completed A Killing Frost on a Wallace Stegner Fellowship (1965-66) at Stanford University. In her third novel, Cale (1970), a boy verging on manhood is the central character, but his powerful mother shares the focus of the story. The most complex and inclusive of her novels is her latest, Shadow of the Mountain (1977), in which an upper-middleclass Southern girl tours Europe, joins the Appalachian Corps, and settles down in the North Carolina mountains to save the natives from poverty. But the cultural chasm that yawns
between her and the people she is to "help" proves too deep for her meager understanding and she, puzzled to the end, is killed by some of them.

The novels have won wide and favorable critical notice; like her numerous short stories, they grow out of the same Southern traditions as the writings of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Reynolds Price. Wilkinson held a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1973-74 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979. She has taught imaginative writing at Sweet Briar College, Hollins College, the College of William and Mary, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In addition to her fiction she has published critical essays, articles on the teaching of imaginative writing, and one nonfiction book, *The Stainless Steel Carrot* (1973). This book, a factual account of the career of automobile race driver John Morton, explores her second most consuming occupation. She earns a portion of her living timing races, in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Depending on whether the racing circuit is in its western or eastern phase, she lives in either El Segundo, California, or just outside Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In North Carolina she and her sister, the potter Margot Wilkinson, share a bungalow in the woods which houses Margot's pottery studio and shop.

Wilkinson's fifth novel, *Bone of My Bones*, will be published in the fall of 1981.

JGV: Where in yourself does your fiction come from? You've written and rewritten five novels, a non-fiction book on auto-racing, numerous children's books, and short pieces for magazines. You spend a lot of time in the act of writing. Yet you do and have done much else. Would you describe some of your other strong interests, besides writing and reading, that are sources of your art.

SW: Well, from childhood I have been an outdoor person. I was never able to tolerate being trapped in a small space for very long. My writing grew out of my attachment to the out-of-doors rather than out of my attachment to books. I read as a child but the thing that started my creative process was not reading but being on my horse, playing in the
woods, listening to my grandmother, working on the farm with her, being around animals. These formed the very early impressions that worked their way into art so that my development as an artist is grounded in that, rather than in anything literary. I never imitated literature; I imitated life and felt a necessity to structure and restructure what I saw. That is as much a part of me as the color of my eyes, as much an unchangeable thing.

JGV: Do you still need this stimulation?
SW: I didn’t realize how much attachment I had to the out-of-doors that I can respond to, until I found myself in a situation where there was no out-of-doors, which didn’t happen until I was twenty-five years old. I was at Stanford University, and I lived in a concrete building with a concrete yard beside a concrete freeway and I suddenly realized how hostile I could get towards my environment when it was hostile towards me. But during that time I wrote A Killing Frost, in which the main character is a child who is down low to the ground, absolutely in touch with the earth and living things. And there was nothing living around me at the time I was writing, so the novel was totally worked through my memory. I realized then how vivid and meaningful this attachment is for me.

JGV: So you turned into yourself and wrote seriously when you didn’t have access to the kind of active, outdoor life that had been so important to you.
SW: Right. And it’s funny. It mattered to me personally that the outdoors wasn’t there, but it didn’t matter to my work. And that’s a very important kind of discovery. I found myself saying, “Gee, I’d really love to have a horse.” I love having a horse. But if I die tomorrow or if I die forty years from now, I will know that I had a horse. It’s mine. And the joy of it is there even though I can’t participate in it as a day to day thing.

JGV: Then the need to be in touch with natural things doesn’t have to be lived out all the time.
SW: No, it doesn’t. The basic experience for me is already there. When I was in Wales, I saw where Dylan Thomas wrote and I was absolutely taken by the sheer beauty of the cliffs and the ocean and the rocks and the little house there. And I felt that I wasn’t really sure, if I’d have been in that
little house, that I could have written. I think I would have been out playing in the hills.

JGV: So the creative work of writing fiction is for you part of a rhythmical process in which you go through a phase of active experience and then a phase of withdrawal and work.

SW: Yes, it is. And I also think that this physical energy, this activeness in me, even though it might seem contrary to what I do, really isn't.

JGV: That active interest in the physical world has found a lot of expression in your life. You've been a championship tennis player, you've been interested in automobile racing, still earn a part of your living as a race timer. You've been a painter. Is it ever a hard choice to give yourself the months that you need to write a novel, the months by yourself, sitting still?

SW: It's very hard. One of the hardest things is my own inability to know exactly how long it's going to take me to do something. I think we all sometimes say it's going to take only two hours to do this, and it takes four. So because of my active life, and because I do make part of my living from this active life, I recently had a very frustrating experience. I needed to complete the revision of the last part of the novel I'm working on now. I had figured how many weeks it would take me to do this. Well, it took me longer than that. I misjudged completely. So the first thing I had to give up was going to Sebring. The second thing I had to give up was going to the U.S. Grand Prix at Long Beach. I'm just like a child saying, "All my friends are getting to go. Why can't I?" Also I had a series of lectures lined up and had to come back East to do them. People were expecting me, and I had to give up the fun things in order to complete that draft and give those lectures. Of course, the irony was that I did complete the draft, but I had to do it again, because it wasn't really what I wanted. So after the lectures were over, I started back on the revision process. Did I learn my lesson? Nope. Again I stupidly scheduled my time. I had to go to Le Mans. I mean everybody was saying, "Oh, that's fantastic, you've been asked to go to Le Mans." It was an all-expense paid trip to France to time one of the biggest races in the world. I'd never done it before. Again. There I was in France trying, between practice sessions, to get this revision done.
So I still haven’t two lives.

JGV: And still there are frequent conflicts for you?

SW: Yes, I’ve messed up a lot. The choices are hard. While I was doing Cale during the late sixties I got into my first deep connection with auto racing. I discovered I was very good at timing, and that I could do it professionally and make money at it because I have this peculiar quality of being able to remain calm, to use a very mathematical, technical part of my mind. I can hit the button on three cars per second, write the times down, do all the subtraction, while people are spinning out and crashing and screaming all around me. And I can concentrate through all that, and do it without great difficulty. And I’m getting better and better at it. I’m one of two or three people in the country who do it, so my services are in demand. But in the late sixties when I was trying to write Cale, I developed a split personality. I was my mother, and I was myself. The mother said, “You can’t go to the race this weekend, unless you finish “x” number of pages of Cale.” And I think that’s why Cale is such a long book. But it all worked out. It was a discipline that I put myself into. The crucial thing for any writer is that you have to know yourself, your own weaknesses. You have to know your ways of procrastinating. When I catch myself doing housework, I say, “What should I be doing other than this?” I hate housework. There’s no way I’m going to be doing housework, unless I should be writing. So I make myself write and leave the house until someone else does it or until the manuscript is in the mail. I’m knowing myself better and better, but I am still, at the tender old age of forty, making those very drastic mistakes. Now the world is not waiting with bated breath for this novel. But I am, by damn, because I want to finish it. It’s been three years, and I want it done. So it was a tremendous frustration to me this summer, because I can’t change the date of a race. I can change the delivery date of a book, but I can’t change the date of a race. If Paul Newman, whose team I time for, says the race is that weekend, then it’s that weekend. That’s the weekend I have to be there. Now, I think there’s something else to be said about intense physical activity for me, like back when I played tennis. I played tennis and rode horses just as hard as I played tennis. I played tennis from dawn ‘til
dark, but still all during that time of my life, when I was too
tired to continue playing, I went to my room and wrote.

JGV: You still had left the kind of energy required to write.

SW: The kind of energy left is the key. There’s a big turnabout
going there. I need to get rid of that physical energy. I need
to go out and ride my bicycle or play racquetball or swim or
do something, and I write better and more.

JGV: That expenditure of physical energy produces to some
extent the energy that it takes to write?

SW: I think so. The other way to see it is that the physical
energy has to be burned away so I can stand the
confinement. While I’m working, I’m a non-participant in
life.

JGV: Let me ask you about another kind of choice that I think
your art must involve for you as a woman. You have chosen
to live your life a certain way which is not according to the
traditional patterns of women’s experience. Was that a
difficult choice to make, the choice not to marry, the choice
not to have children, not to make a permanent home?

SW: That was an easy choice.

JGV: Why do you think that it was easy for you while it’s
hard, even impossible, for some people?

SW: In my early college years when everyone had boyfriend
and everyone was planning weddings and all my friends
were getting married, I had a boyfriend too, a very
attractive one, but even then I was totally aware that
marriage was not a possibility, because I was burning to be
something that I knew a husband and children would
prevent.

JGV: And, along with the burning you describe, was there a
confidence that you could accomplish what you wanted?

SW: Yes, I never didn’t believe I could write a novel. I have to
say I was shocked and surprised the day I sold my first
book. The process was gradual: rejections, revisions, and
then it happened. But when I was twenty years old my
teacher Randall Jarrell had told me that if I kept working as
hard as I was working then it was inevitable that I was going
to publish. Sadly, he didn’t live to see it, but he knew it was
going to happen, and he told me so and that stuck in my
mind like a barb, because here’s something exterior. Here’s a
person outside of me that knows.
An authoritative person in your life, at that.

Right, Jarrell verified for me that there are people who want what I’m writing, people who will recognize what I’m doing as something good. So I just kept that in my mind as a verification of what I believed, but I think I needed that. I think he came to my life at a very important time.

A prophet whose prophecy helped fulfill itself.

It really was a prophecy, because up until that point I had a self-imposed privacy. I didn’t show my work to people. I was turned down at the age of twelve by a seventh-grade teacher. She said “You write what I tell you to write.” She was disgusted by a story I gave her in which I had my grandmother picking ticks off a dog. I’m using this in my new novel. I thought that this was a very nice relationship between an old woman and a dog. She picked the ticks and scratched his back and he knew he could come to her and get the ticks taken off. Well, I thought this was very nice and worthy of a place in fiction but my teacher was appalled.

A tick picking relationship.

Right. From that I learned something very important and that is that negative reinforcement is crucial. The worst thing in the world, I think, that could have happened to me would have been if she’d swept her wonderful wing over me and said, “Oh, isn’t this marvelous, little Sylvia’s going to be an artist. Everyone look at little Sylvia.” Because the best thing was, I went through the next eight years with no one looking at little Sylvia. She was all by herself up in her room doing her book, writing bad things, terrible writing.

At what age did you start to write a novel?

I started writing Moss on the North Side when I was twelve. The first draft of it is in my seventh-grade Blue Horse notebook. It evolved over those years, while I was alone, and my parents respected my privacy. They didn’t monitor my activities. When I was a child, we had materials to make things with. We were not given prepared toys. We were allowed a lot of time alone. We were allowed to go off with our animals. Mother has told me how she felt when she’d see my horse coming home with an empty saddle, but she knew that the important thing was to let me go off on that horse by myself, because that’s what I wanted to do. I
believe that the key to raising creative children is to respect their solitude.

JGV: Do you credit that attitude of your mother's, of your family generally, with your knowledge of what you wanted to be, your confidence that you could do what you wanted to do, and the ease with which you made the choice of a kind of life that would allow you to do it?

SW: I think it is part of it. I think it's interesting that I have a sister who's not married either and who is also an artist, a potter. I don't think my parents did it intentionally. I think it just happened.

JGV: Has there ever been a time when you missed being married, having a family?

SW: No, never. I enjoy male company. I enjoy doing things with people. I have never wanted a baby. And that's almost a frightening thing to say, because so many people, men included, think of bearing children as an ultimate experience. A race driver I sat next to on a plane not long ago said to me, "It must be a fantastic thing, you know, that every woman knows that she can have a child, she can produce a being inside her." Me, I'm thinking it must be fantastic to drive a Porsche 220 miles an hour at Le Mans. The baby I've never wanted.

JGV: Yet you like children—a big part of your early writing particularly, and I know of your new novel, reveals your interest in them, your insight into them.

SW: And I write about mothers. In fact, Falissa in Cale has a baby, and it's her whole life, this baby. I'm interested in the parent-child relationship and in the children. And I like to work with children, but I want to turn them on and off. It's all right a couple of hours, but that's about all I can take. I didn't let motherhood be something I would just casually imagine. I put it through all its paces so that I knew exactly what it would entail for me. I knew that the very moment a woman has a child that child exists twenty-four hours of every day, and the mother is usually responsible for knowing where it is, and that it's being taken care of, and I knew that I personally was incapable of giving twenty-four hours a day to anyone but Sylvia. What I'm saying is totally selfish but it's also a recognition that, given my nature, I do not have time for that, that is not what I choose to do with
my life.

JGV: Do you consider your art a selfish preoccupation?

SW: In the first stages it is. Maybe I'm going to come off not looking so good, not like such a nice person, but I think in the early stages, the very fact that I remained private for so many years was because I didn't need anybody else to read it. I did the work for me, and I did it because I was looking for an outlet for what I felt. I had to say what I wanted to say, and the fact that an audience came along in the end was good.

JGV: And that helped make you a novelist, capable of writing something accessible to other people.

SW: And it also means you grow. If you don't have an audience, if you don't write for people to understand then it's ultimately an empty exercise. That reminds me of something Reynolds Price said, "You write for a small number of people, because so few people will ever read your work as closely as you read it or care as much as you about all the small things." But while I'm producing it, in its early and painful stages, it's such a totally alone process that you feel like people do absolutely nothing but try to keep you from getting it written.

JGV: I want to go back to some of the things you've said about your mother. In many mother-daughter relationships the mother conveys to the daughter the necessity of imitating her role and the daughter often gets the message that this is the only way she can be a woman. It seems that your mother was unusual in not implanting this idea in you or your sister, Margot.

SW: She told us something she couldn't verbalize. And she never has been able to, and I didn't know what she was telling us. But I know it now. When we were little girls, we couldn't have had a better mother for motherliness. I mean she did things with us. She showed us how to sew. She explained things to us. Somebody asked her once about raising us, and she said, "Well I grew up with them." She felt that until we existed she didn't really experience life. A few years ago Margot and I took her to Europe, and it was like she was the youngest of the three, because she had an openness to experience that was much more childlike in many ways than ours. But in the last ten years, since Margot
and I no longer need her as a security figure, she has
suddenly become a painter, and she paints with a drive that’s
unbelievable. She can work all day long. She can paint eight
to ten hours without stopping.

JGV: So you think what she was telling you non-verbally was
that there were lots of other things that you could do besides
what she herself was doing.
SW: And she never said it, and she never knew about it
herself. Now she says that all her life she wanted to paint,
but she never told me that. She made beautiful clothes for
us, very creative clothes. We would dream things up and she
would create them so we never had to be trapped by what
you could buy in a store. But she never thought about using
paints and canvas. But now she doesn’t give her
grandchildren the time she gave her children, which I think
is interesting, because now she creates for herself. It’s her
turn now. My father resents it. He’ll say, “Oh, she’s in there
painting,” just like most people would say about someone
doing something that’s not worthwhile.

JGV: I’d like to change tacks for a moment. You started writing
your first novel when you were twelve years old. What are
your ideas about what talent for fiction is? How was your
mind different from that of the typical twelve-year-old? How
come you felt compelled to start writing a novel then, and
you’ve kept writing fiction for almost thirty years?

SW: I always think of a quality that my grandma who was the
Miss Liz in Killing Frost always used to say I had, that I was
one of the hard-headedest little kids she ever saw. And I
think I have such hard-headedness that when I decide I’m
going to do something, right or wrong, I’m going to do it.
When I started a project even as a kid, even though I got,
say twenty percent of it done and knew it was going to be a
total disaster, I finished it. I had a sense of completion, from
the time I was a child. I would start embroidering these
things I was going to give people for Christmas. I’d see other
little kids embroider three flowers and quit. I’d do the whole
damn thing, hours and hours and hours of work, long past
the time when I started to hate what I was doing. But I
finished. My first novel, Moss on the North Side went
through eleven drafts. Well, that won’t happen again, I
hope. Sometimes I think I’m coming close, but I don’t make
as many mistakes, because I have done it once. I've stuck it out once.

JGV: So you think that your talent derives from your nature, inborn, conditioned, or both.

SW: When I started teaching school, I realized there was no shortage of talent. I've had so many talented students over the years. I've taught creative writing maybe seven years all told, and I've had far more talented students than I ever would have dreamed I would, but I've had almost none who would stick with a project as long as I was willing to stick with it, and would give it the time that it deserved, that it needed. So when I finish a novel, I get a deep sense of contentment, of satisfaction, and I pack everything away, the notes, rough drafts. The drive toward that sense of completion keeps me going.

JGV: One of the great pleasures of writing is having written.

SW: Yes. I pack away all the rough drafts, and I say, it is done. I'm going to do another one, but, for now, it is done. Now, talent, that doesn't really say anything about talent.

JGV: I think it does. I think that's one element in a set of abilities and characteristics that make it possible for a person to write fiction. I wonder if you think this is part of your talent: your ability to create in your mind a world and completely live in this world which has a life of its own with characters that move and speak autonomously. It seems to me that a lot of fiction writers have this going on in their minds. They take it for granted and think that other people have this ability. But most other people don't.

SW: Yes, it seems so much a part of it. As a child I can remember many a night when I'd go up in my room after riding all day, and lie for hours thinking of stories for this character I had, this half-Indian girl, and I didn't actually have to write them. I could just think them. And before I went to sleep, I would go through the scenes three or four times in my mind and do them different ways. Try them. I was doing revision just in my head. And I didn't think there was anything at all unusual about this. Eventually I'd write them down.

JGV: When did you find out that there was something unusual about this?

SW: I really don't think I discovered in any precise way that it
was different or that something unusual was going on, until I wrote this last novel. And this was after you and I discussed differences between a prose writer's mind and a poet's. In the new book I illustrate the creative process with the figure of a snake swallowing a doorknob. The experience that caused me to write this was a snake that swallowed a porcelain doorknob thinking it was an egg, and then tried to crawl through a knothole and got stuck and died. Now, truthfully when I start going back through my mind, I can't remember whether that actually happened or whether that was a joke my daddy told me or just what exactly happened. But I decided to take that snake and that doorknob and run them through a sequence of possible ways the incident could be used by my character, Ella Ruth Higgins, a budding writer, who is thinking in this way. She did it as a joke, as the old story of the snake swallowing the doorknob and after he gets stuck in the knothole he sees a rabbit going by on the other side, and he swallows the rabbit, and he's stuck from both directions, and he dies. You know the moral of the story. I do remember my grandmother having a phony egg that she used to slip under the hens when they started setting. She'd pull out the eggs she wanted to cook and stick a doorknob under them and let them warm up the doorknob thinking it was an egg. So I did go through all of these, and I wrote maybe ten in this sequence of different ways a fiction writer could deal with this: ways you would lie about it, ways you would stretch the truth, how you would actually let this experience affect you. But in the final analysis what Ella Ruth says is, 'I don't know why but I can't just walk by that snake and that doorknob. Why can't I just walk by it like everybody else and say, 'Oh, a snake swallowed a doorknob; isn't that something,' and forget it.' And I think a poet would have done something totally different with that in writing from what I did with it as a fiction writer. A poet would send it through her or his creative consciousness in a different way to find out whether it was going to come out in a usable form. So what I am trying to do there is talk about the way a fiction writer's mind works with experience. Yes, something happens to you or you see something, and you know it means something, but you don't know what. And I think that that's one of the reasons I have to do so
much revising—it's like Flannery O'Connor says, "How do I know what I'm going to write 'til I write it?" I have this feeling, but I don't know what I'm going to do with it until I do it.

JGV: Human events, or phenomena of the natural world, that you totally understand, which don't hold any puzzlements for you, they aren't fruitful in that same way, is that what you're saying? That phenomena that puzzle you are what you explore and work at giving form to?

SW: Yes, it has to go through and get sifted back out in a way that I know there's a meaning there, and it's up to me either to find its meaning or give it a meaning. Sometimes it's just as artificial as giving it to it, rather than just finding out what's already there.

JGV: And the form of the art, the patterns that comprise "meaning" in the work are the order that you finally can come to see in the experience.

SW: And I think that a lot of times a writer like me requires a patience of a reader that a lot of readers quite understandably simply don't have. They don't have that much interest in what I'm looking for the significance in. That I can perfectly well understand and I'm not offended to know that my snake and doorknob may not in any way interest a certain kind of reader.

JGV: That leads me to another question I want to ask. What do you see as the use of fiction generally? What's the function of it? What does fiction do? Why does it continue to exist?

SW: Has it?

JGV: Well, now that's a good question, too, but, generally, why do you think fiction is important? Why is it an art form?

SW: Faulkner said that fiction is about the simple things of the heart. I think it serves to ground us, to give us something to come back to that is basic: human love, human change, human tragedy. I think I have a very simple idea that no matter what the age, what the times, that the core in the heart of fiction is the human being under the stress of change.

JGV: It is the change itself that's constant?

SW: Yes.

JGV: But we live in all of those things every day. We live in
those simplicities of the heart, whether we are conscious of it or not. What is it about fiction, and what fiction does with experience, that makes it useful, pleasurable, to us? Are you creating a mind-energy field that the reader can enter, and understand through living it affectively?

SW: My job is to make the fictional experience contain the total of my interests and observations so that a reader can see and touch and smell and taste what I know is there. It can be experienced this way by my reader if I pick the right details. I have to know what I'm saying is important and is worth saying. And I am seeking to find ways that I know will reach the reader, and I am trying to recreate completely this world that's in my brain in words so that it can be experienced by my audience.

JGV: So what you're making is a real world, the imaginary garden with the real toad.

SW: Yes. And I care enough about the toad in that garden to think he's worth giving my whole life to, and that's probably the only thing in my existence that I've never questioned. I've questioned everything else and considered the possibility of rejecting everything else: every love, every hate, everything that has ever entered into my life but that; and that is the one thing—creating a fictional world through writing—that is unchallengeable. Maybe that's why I have a hard time verbalizing what I do.

JGV: I think you have said it well.