

Fall 2005

An Interview with Emily Wilson

Devon Wooten

Emily Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Wooten, Devon and Wilson, Emily (2005) "An Interview with Emily Wilson," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 63 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss63/23>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

An Interview with Emily Wilson

Devon Wootten

*Emily Wilson is the author of *The Keep*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, and publishes the occasional chapbook under the imprint Spurwink Press.*

Devon Wootten: You are the proprietor of a small press. How does that activity interact with your poetry?

Emily Wilson: I'm not sure it does interact. The two activities are, for me, pretty discrete. In some ways, printing is a relief from writing poetry—the very technical, concrete nature of the work, of bringing a project through to completion. I've always enjoyed making things, and printing is a good outlet for one's perfectionist tendencies. Most printers I know are obsessive perfectionists. The poets I know are too, but I feel I'm always trying to manage my obsessiveness in poetry, to not let it get too much hold, because I want to have a kind of freedom too, a looseness that will come into tension with the tighter, more constrained parts of my nature. That is not to say that the creative activity of printing, of designing a book or a broadside doesn't require that same kind of balance. Now that I think about it, the two processes are probably not that different from each other. They just feel different to me. And I like the mechanical aspects of printing. The machines are very cool, and it's satisfying to figure how to work them. I wish I had more time to print right now, but I'm moving around too much. I haven't been in the vicinity of my own press for quite a while and I miss it. Now, though, I will have to admit that I have noticed, lately, words and ideas from the realm of printing making their way into my poems. So there must be some subliminal cross-over going on.

DW: Can you talk more about this "tension" in your poetry? How do you see it working?

EW: The specific kind of tension I think I was referring to is the one I feel between the stringencies of the process—formal elements, syntactical efforts to "make sense," precision of image or diction, all the things that feel rigorous to

me—coming up against a desire to be in the flow and flux of imagining, of incipient meaning, of the poem's becoming something of its own, sort of despite me or despite whatever intention I might have started with. I've had plenty of experiences that I would identify as a kind of verbal strangulation, where the stringencies hold too much power and the poem can never quite become something interesting or alive to its own mechanisms. That sounds oxymoronic. But it is a kind of aliveness—that not-quite-pin-downable quality that poems have when they succeed—that sense of them having truly been discoveries—that is what I am always after. But it doesn't always happen, probably for one of two reasons: not enough rigor or not enough freedom. Or both. I'm probably more naturally bent toward the former so I feel I have to counter that part of myself a bit to stay open and loose in a poem, as it's going along. I have a narrowing-off tendency, a demonic editor, that I have to work against. It's a tension that extends into other parts of my life, of course. Poetic struggles seem to tend to do that.

DW: The idea of the poem "becoming something of its own" is such a slippery concept. It seems to beg the question of the role of the poet in creation. Where do you feel positioned in relation to your poetry?

EW: It is a slippery concept. I think what I'm getting at is the way in which the poem derives, in part, from processes or reservoirs that one may not necessarily be aware of—all the things that can happen in a poem that surprise the writer, or feel surprising because they are not prompted by conscious intentions or aims. And in fact, we often are not even aware of these things until someone else points them out to us. I guess I am always wanting that kind of subliminal activity to be going on, so the problem becomes one of admitting it into the process or at least not putting up too many barriers to it. It's a tricky area. The terrain between conscious control of the act of writing and unconscious entrapments and happenings that have a way of surfacing through the engagement with language. It's probably more of an effect of a state of being. I don't know. That's getting a little gauzy. I like Frost's concept of the "freedom of [his] material"—admittedly a difficult thing to talk about.

DW: I think the idea of the "state of being" of the poet in the act of creation is fascinating—but it raises so many questions for me. If the language of the poem comes out of an 'openness'—to the subliminal, to the possible, to a source—it would seem to me an intensely personal process; one that might result in a poem that is, for a reader, difficult to access in the way a traditional narrative might be said to be accessible. What then, in your mind, does poetry 'do'? Does it have at its origin the recreation of this 'genetic' state in the reader?

Or is it something else?

EW: I don't really know what it "does." What does any art form do? But it does do something. Something happens. Something changes for me, the reader. Whether it's a momentary shift in the material, in the surface of the "real" (I was just reading Nabokov's statement about "reality" being the only word that should never be used except in quotation marks!) or in my sense of what is real or fixed in the world, I'm not sure. It seems to come down to a feeling of gaps, displacements, or little tears and stretches in my perception of the appearances of things, accepted notions and deductions. It can be physical gaps or emotional gaps or psychological gaps or moral gaps or intellectual gaps. Probably all of these things together and overlapping with each other. "Genesisic" is probably apt but so too, the decompositional, the destructive and constructive both. Language, when put to its full powers, seems so incredibly alive and flexible and plastic to me. Utterly fixative and utterly fugitive. As far as its effects being more or less accessible, I guess I always have some sort of faith that it will "read," generally or particularly. When I am reading, that feeling of things getting across, however partially and strangely, is always so marvelous to me, so thrilling, so hopeful. I realize I am describing a paradoxical thing: the idea of writing getting something across and at the same time eliciting a feeling of the gaps. I'm sorry to be so abstruse. I do not often think about the question of accessibility while I am writing. I am not sure I am thinking about much beyond what the words are accomplishing together in their little field, what effects they are having, what associations they are dragging in. What further abridgements they are making toward. I am concerned with having that experience, of getting across something difficult in myself.

DW: In many of your poems there is a 'you' addressed (I'm thinking specifically of "Ontogeny"). How do you see apostrophic address working in your poems?

EW: I think it's just another thing that makes itself available to me as I push into a piece of writing. In that series called "Ontogeny," the poems are addressing, in many cases, a particular "you" are an instance of trying to write about a particular intimate relationship. I think there is slippage, though, where the "you" becomes sort of frayed, or layered with other things, other levels of address or shades of address. It feels like a self-address at some points. So my instinct was to keep it somewhat open. I was interested in ways that relationships can be thought of as a kind of evolution, or a thing that evolves, or devolves as the case may be. That series is really, to me, a kind of reverse ontogeny, starting from the most "evolved" state and tracing back to a less formed, or fixed, state. The order

of the sequence goes back in time. The word “unstructuring” in the last poem is, I think, angling toward a sense of that process of devolution, or loss of form or structural integrity. That as much as things evolve and “structure” themselves as they go, they are also always in the process of being broken down. Maybe that is why the “you” (and the “we”) disappears in that last poem. It’s sort of existing before the fact. There’s no “other” to face yet, or to understand oneself in relationship to—since it was the first poem I wrote, I’m sure I didn’t yet know I was going to write a series that would be addressed to anyone. The poems are arranged in the reverse order in which I wrote them. So there must have been something I wanted to gain by reading them back to myself, backwards, a kind of mirror image of the process of writing them. I don’t remember that I set out to write a poem of overt address, *per se*; that’s just what it became as I went and as the “facts” kept pushing their way in. Other times, I think the formal address has arisen out of some need to speak to a general entity, to the species perhaps, or to our historical antecedents or collective consciousness, to adopt an overly psychological frame. I really think these things just happen as a poem moves forward. And even if there is not a formal address, the poem is speaking to some implied other person, or group of persons or something else.

But I wanted to get back to the question of accessibility because I was just reading something by the Russian filmmaker, Andrey Tarkovsky, that seemed relevant. Mainly I was struck by his description of the relationship between the film (as it represents the creative consciousness of the director, or “author”) and the audience as one of essentially reciprocal activity. That the audience is not a passive receiver of the work, but rather a partner in formulating and realizing its potential. That it is a communal undertaking that requires creative effort on both sides. And I was thinking how reading really is the same, for me—it is an active effort, a striving for understanding, a striving to feel the residue of the work, its “unified field,” to meet up with it and really feel it. It is an engagement that requires effort, and time, and the extension of myself. And I find this the most rewarding kind of reading—where I feel the thing is just out of my grasp, maybe three or four steps, or many more, ahead of me, and I feel that incredible gift of something truly fresh and genuinely challenging in its reaches. So I feel works of art are accessible, always, depending on my ability to go toward them, to engage with them and push myself to the point where I feel the strain, the possibility of more than I might ever be able to grasp. And that this is really a complementary feeling to being in the writing of a poem.

DW: I wanted to ask you about the role of nature in your poems. I’m thinking of your beautiful poem “Winter Journal”. I get the sense that many poets feel uncomfortable with natural imagery—trees, fish, birds—almost as if it is embar-

rasing to utter these words. Do you find this to be the case? How do you feel nature to be working in your poems?

EW: "Nature" is almost always a part of my subject matter—it is the material at hand, an endlessly complicated subject. I may at times ask myself why I do not write poems with more people or manmade things in them. But this is, I think, a superficial question. I find the material facts of "nature" to be endlessly interesting, but really, the distinctions pretty quickly break down. Being outside, in the physical surroundings, was one of the things that prompted me to write poems from the start. I am much more inclined now to try to get at the finer grains of the term—ideas of subjectivity, of my own "nature," concepts of what is "natural" vs. what is not, all of these various complicating layers. I think the thing that always surfaces for me in writing (and I'm not even sure I ever really feel that I am writing "about nature"), or that I always feel myself coming up against, is a sense of its fundamental intractability. That whatever form my investigations take, "nature" remains somehow silent to me. Of course, nature is not inured, and we seem to be very good at bending it to our will. But just that it is such a slippery and in some ways, unknowable, thing, uncategorizable, ultimately elusive as a concept as much as a real entity—even as we pursue it with greater and greater technical understanding. I feel I have this experience often. Of being in a natural setting and finding it utterly mysterious, utterly confounding in its revealed detail. It defies explication. And as I keep going down that road, I am continually amazed at how rich it is a subject matter. A real "matter," in all the senses of that word. It is inexhaustible because it is so fundamental, and so fundamental to poetry, really. Because every poem that is ostensibly "about nature" is a construction, in its way, is an act of subjective choices and renderings, of high artifice. Even the most "natural" seeming things. And so I feel I am always in the thick of this. In a poem, there is the knowledge, always, that I am "reconstructing" a physical memory or experience of the natural world, and bending it to my will, "seeing" it in a way that is useful to me. And that process often becomes the real subject. And that seems both highly problematic and utterly crucial. I think at the heart of it must be a desire to remain aware and sensate. To be alive to the world, which I think is a part of every artist's quest. This seems very, very important to me. But then I am compelled to make something—to mess around with the given. And the pressure of that boundary is very critical to me.

DW: Though it seems impossible for anyone to say how one's poems are 'coming along,' I'm curious as to what you're working on at the moment and how it seems to be revealing itself.

EW: I have been accumulating new poems for a few years now that, in some ways, feel like experiments in extending the work of those Winter Journal poems. Trying to open up the forms, to keep pressure and sustain. I had gotten myself into a little formal trap, in some ways, in my first book—though it was very useful up to a point—of short coupleted poems. The process there began to dictate a limit of length that I became impatient with. The Winter Journal was the key, the intermediate step—it really opened things up for me in a way that is still manifesting. So I'm just hoping to keep going in that. To build bigger, more complex, more interesting things.