

ПРОБЛЕМЫ РЕЦЕПЦИИ ЗАРУБЕЖНОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ



МЭРИ-КЕЙ УИЛМЕРС. ВОПЛОЩАЯ ЖЕЛАЕМОЕ

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MARY-KAY WILMERS. ACHIEVING THE DESIRED

Abstract. It is difficult to exaggerate the breadth and depth of Mary-Kay Wilmers' contribution to national and international culture. Since 1992, she has been the editor of the *London Review of Books*. Her book *The Eitingons: A Twentieth-Century Story* (2009) came out in London and New York, in Moscow, in Paris. In *Human Relations and Other Difficulties* (2018) her long essays (reviews) were collected – from *Listener*, *New Yorker*, the *LRB*. This article presents her works in a literary context, gives her stylistic portrait through analysis of dominant features of her language personality. The first part of the article is devoted to *The Eitingons*. The research of her remarkable family evolved into a beautifully written book where the narrator is the most intriguing character. Historical indefiniteness did not embarrass the author, moreover, her penetration and postmodern approach turned the enigmas of history into a fascinating account where ambivalence and paradoxes helped to portray the mystery of life. The first Russian translation let you feel the difficulties of transforming into a different language her highly delicate and sophisticated approach, her lightness, ambivalence, intimate intonation. In the second part, devoted to *Human Relations*, special attention is paid to her works on obituaries, advertising encyclopedia, language of the novel reviewing, 'difficult women.' Close reading demonstrates the author's functional, balanced, considerate, courageous, challenging, critical, convivial approach. Right priorities, admirable style, wisdom, charm on page are characteristics of Mary-Kay Wilmers' 'modest unemphatic originality'. The third part touches upon the books devoted to her.

Key words: novels; literary criticism; reviews; essays; literary creative activity.

Аннотация. Невозможно переоценить широту и глубину влияния Мэри-Кей Уилмерс на национальную и мировую культуру. С 1992 года она возглавляет «Лондонское книжное обозрение», тираж которого превысил 70 000. Параллельно редакторской работе она всегда писала – для своего издания, «*Listener*», «*New Yorker*». Ее статьи собраны в сборник «Человеческие отношения и другие сложности» (2018). Книга «*Эйтингоны. Семейная сага двадцатого века*» (2009) вышла в Лондоне и Нью-Йорке, в Москве, в Париже. Данная статья рассматривает труды Мэри-Кей Уилмерс, выявляет особенности ее стилистического портрета путем анализа доминантных черт, свойственных языковой личности. Первая часть статьи посвящена ее книге – семейной истории (Эйтингонов – родственников по материнской линии), истории XX века (Советского Союза, США, Европы, прежде всего), личной истории. Неопределенность и неоднозначность

происходившего не только не поставили автора в тупик, но ее пронизательность и постмодернистский подход способствовали специфическому запечатлению загадок истории и тайн жизни. Сама повествователь стала одной из самых интригующих фигур книги. Первый перевод на русский язык показал, насколько трудно передать тончайший подход автора, ее деликатность, легкость, неоднозначность. Вторая часть статьи посвящена сборнику длинных эссе – рецензий («Лондонское книжное обозрение» предпочитает именно такую жанровую комбинацию). В центре внимания – труды, посвященные некрологам, рекламной энциклопедии, языку рецензий романов (подход Уилмерс всегда функционален), любимой ею женской теме, прежде всего, «сложным женщинам». Пристальное прочтение выявляет характерные черты: безусловную элегантность и вкус; профессионализм, легкость и изящество письма на основе досконального исследования темы; глубину и проблемность публикаций, побуждающих к пересмотру взглядов, корректировке ощущений; виртуозность языка. Для более объемной прорисовки портрета Мэри-Кей Уилмерс в третьей части рассмотрены книги, ей посвященные.

Ключевые слова: литературная критика; рецензии; эссе; литературное творчество.

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Mary-Kay Wilmers co-founded the *London Review of Books* in 1979 [Wilmers 1999: 19], and has been its sole editor since 1992. Her editorial life began long before that: she started at *Faber* in the time of T. S. Eliot, then worked at the *Listener*, then at the *Times Literary Supplement*.

As well as an editor, Mary-Kay Wilmers has been throughout her career a writer. She has written for the *LRB*, the *Listener*, *New Yorker*. She writes exquisitely in all genres, skillfully mixes them with the most memorable effect.

My article about the *LRB*, the most intellectually elegant and the largest-selling literary publication in Europe, was published in the journal of literary criticism and studies of literature *Voprosy Literaturny (Problems of Literature)* [Егорова 2017]. The first two parts of this article are devoted to two books of Mary-Kay Wilmers: her family history – *The Eitingons: A Twentieth-Century Story* (first published in 2009) [Wilmers 2010], a collection of her reviews *Human Relations and Other Difficulties* [Wilmers 2018]. In the third part two more books about Mary-Kay Wilmers are taken into consideration, thus helping to portray her: *Bad Character: A Tribute to Mary-Kay Wilmers* [Bad Character 2008], *Love, Nina: Despatches from Family Life* by Nina Stibbe [Stibbe 2013].

ENIGMAS OF FAMILY HISTORY

The title of the book *The Eitingons: A Twentieth-Century Story* reveals at once that this is a

family history (of the Eitingons, relatives on her mother's side) and a twentieth-century story (of the Soviet Union, Europe, the USA). Mary-Kay's research of her remarkable family has been turned into a beautifully written narration where she is the most intriguing character.

In 'Embarrassment', the first chapter, she looks into her longing to have her late aunt's letters. Her desire was so desperate that she cheated her cousin. They were dividing up their aunt's belongings; it was his turn to choose, so he took a mahogany box with the letters, but as soon as he was out of the room, she emptied the box of the letters. She 'confessed – obviously,' was kindly given both the letters and the box. Here I would like to attract attention not to her family trait – ardent, unstoppable fervor to achieve the desired, and not to disheartening effect of realizing, while reading, what her aunt had been thinking of her – but to the fact that Mary-Kay Wilmers often invites you to look at the choices anew:

'Is it more appropriate for those who inherit the letters along with the clothes and the furniture to read them or put them in the bin? Burning letters has something grand and criminal about it. Putting them out with the rubbish may seem merely disrespectful. But maybe less disrespectful than reading them.'

Why do people write and keep letters – 'out of a need or a wish to memorialise themselves'? Why do we read other people's letters? 'You think

you're interested in their story, only to discover that mainly you're obsessed with your own.' While reading you often stop to think it over:

'And what goes for letters probably goes for every kind of rummaging in other people's lives, whether you're related to them or not. Perhaps there's a case for letting things lie, and being spared the worry about whose story you are really trying to tell and who gave you permission to tell it.'

To me Mary-Kay Wilmers is a disturbing, difficult author, but never disconcerting, misleading, always witty, wise, considerate.

The Eitingons is a book of astonishing scope. There were too many dark corners in the previous century, and their concentration in the book is hardly bearable. Light appears thanks to Mary-Kay's originality and elegance.

Her father, Charles Wilmers (his ancestors, German Jews, came to England in the late 1870s), married glamorous Cecilia Eitingon from the biggest clan of fur dealers, the wealthiest in the world. Being of Jewish origin, they came from Belorussia, moved to Moscow, after the Revolution happily escaped from the new regime. Mary-Kay remembers her childhood in the States in the 1940s – 'in a world filled with Eitingons':

'The Eitingons were excitable and cried far too often and asked unnecessary questions that troubled me for weeks – even years – such as which of my parents I preferred or whose death I would mind more. They weren't tall and glamorous like my father and their English wasn't good: they had heavy Russian accents, mixed up their tenses and did something funny with the definite article.'

Three 'men of their time' are brought into focus: Max Eitingon (1881–1943), Motty Eitingon (1885–1956), Leonid Eitingon (Naum Isaakovich was his real name, 1899–1981).

Leonid was the only one of them who stayed in Russia after the Revolution. From a zealous young Bolshevik he turned into 'a high-level KGB functionary who was also a high-level killer.' As Stalin's man, he executed his missions first on Soviet territory, then abroad. At the end of 1925, he was sent to China (Shanghai, Harbin, Beijing), in the spring of 1929 – to Constantinople, then Syria, Palestine. He acted in Spain during the Civil War, helped to organize the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico. It was he who waited outside the villa in Coyoacán to drive Trotsky's murder-

er away from the scene of the crime. 'As long as I live', Stalin said, 'not a hair of his head shall be touched.' It did not work out like that at all.

Motty Eitingon, uncle of Mary-Kay's mother, is described as 'a man of great wealth and great charm', 'the undisputed head of the clan.' He was a New York fur dealer. His connections with the Soviet Union made him the largest trader in the world. He was suspected and imprisoned by the Bolsheviks, investigated five times by the FBI – in 1942, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1954. The issue was 'Penetration and Possible Use of American Fur Industry by Soviet Agents.' Finally, the FBI concluded, 'The subject <...> is not a pro-Soviet but is a shrewd businessman who posed a pro-Soviet front to gain a choice position with the Russians in order to acquire Russian furs and make a fortune.' Mary-Kay Wilmer didn't find anything to dispute this: 'All things considered, that's surprisingly fair. Yet even more surprising – and in the circumstances providential – it is the Bureau's failure to make any link at all with Leonid, given how many other tenuous associations were invoked to cast Motty as a traitor.'

Max Eitingon was a psychoanalyst, a colleague and friend of Freud's. In 1907, he came to Vienna 'to sit at Freud's feet.' He was 'staggeringly rich and staggeringly generous.' He was interested in Russian philosophy, music, folk songs. Through his friendship with the famous Russian singer, Nadezhda Plevitskaya, he was implicated in the abduction of the White Russian general Miller in Paris in 1937. Was he a Soviet agent? A double agent – 'Stalin's man as well as Freud's?' 'Leonid's agent in Freudian camouflage?'

Were the Eitingons connected by more than their family name? Were they working together for the Soviet government? Stephen Schwartz stated it in his article 'Intellectuals and Assassins: Annals of Stalin's Killerati' (*Times Book Review*, 24 January 1988) and in his answer to Theodore Draper's response (*New York Review of Books*, 14 April 1988) in a letter (*New York Review*, 16 June 1988).

Mary-Kay Wilmers could not stay aside. She clearly formulated her stance:

'Neither Communist not anti-Communist, captivated by the left but never quite on the left, I'd like to say that I've set out to find the truth (but I'm not sure there will be a truth) or to avenge my family's honour (in whose eyes?) or to shine the light of freedom into the dark spaces of the twen-

tieth century. But if that can't be done, if I can't manage these things, I can at least try to do these three men the justice of describing their lives as far as it's been possible for me to know them.'

It is a noble aim of this deeply researched chronicle. According to eight and a half pages of bibliography, Mary-Kay read a lot on the subject. She visited Leonid's relatives in Moscow, went to KGB archives, met KGB officers and former agents. Her mix of history and memoir, biography and travel, psychological penetration and unbiased impartiality is admirable. She dares to attract attention to the most problematic issues, to cast light on questions that cannot be answered, to challenge everything. A CIA operative saw Leonid Eitingon as a person 'who might well have used a Jewish background as a cover.' Mary-Kay Wilmers expands this line of reasoning: Motty might have used the fur trade as a cover, Max – psychoanalysis. 'Maybe we all use our lives as cover.'

She does not forget to mention that before her parents got married, according to the letters, her 'strait-laced paternal grandparents' were suspicious of Mrs Eitingons as a spy: what had she been doing in Moscow? 'It wasn't a normal place to go for a holiday. How could my father be sure that she wasn't in the pay of the Soviets?' In this general atmosphere of espionage and suspicion, you may feel like losing the ground of reality but Mary-Kay's common sense and highly developed irony always brings you back to sanity.

Her perception of the Soviet reality is strikingly acute. She knows, for example, that Soviet citizens several times in the course of their career had to produce formal accounts of themselves – 'autobiographies', and it had to be done with care and a certain artfulness. You had to know not only which credentials were right and how to balance self-justification and self-criticism but you had to figure out in advance how your words could be twisted against you by someone who had power and did not wish you well. You feel like it is Mary-Kay's intuition enlarged by her writer's/ editorial experience, her feeling of the language as an entity.

While communicating in the Soviet Union, she went beyond words to her interlocutors' meanings. If, for example, Zoya (Leonid's stepdaughter born in 1920) said 'don't ask me' Mary-Kay took it as 'don't quote me.' It was prudent of her not to pay attention to the titles like 'military

attaché', 'vice-consul', 'third secretary': as she noticed, these words were almost invariably meaningless, or meaningful only in the sense that they denoted a spy. You could trust nothing:

'What's endlessly interesting and endlessly frustrating about the business of Leonid's life is that every anecdote from the trivially personal to the mega-political exists in more than one version, and you can never be sure of the story you're trying to tell.'

The archives were of no help: '...it was in the nature of Soviet bureaucracy to require that everything be documented and nothing divulged.'

All that might lead you to despair but Mary-Kay's penetration, sense of humour and postmodern approach turned it into a fascinating account:

'Every intelligence agent has a duty to disinform, which must be liberating when you're writing an account of your life; disinformation is a very postmodern thing: it allows you to have your cake and eat it.'

It is interesting to observe how 'tedious stretches of Soviet-speak' for Mary-Kay Wilmers go way beyond the Soviet system:

'...with Motty's files as with Leonid's, repetition is of the essence, and by reading them through, subjecting oneself to the tedium of the same story, or the same allegation, reiterated six or seven times, one begins to see American anti-Communism, and its Soviet counterpart, in a new light – as cults modeled on other cults, sacralised forms of words.'

Is it possible to get down to the bottom? Obviously not. People, archives, photos do not reveal their mysteries. Mary-Kay had a photo of Motty taken probably in the early 1940s:

'I've looked at this photo now and then, and come to feel that despite the frankness of expression and the openness of the face itself, this is a portrait of an unknowable person. I don't mean that something inconceivable was hidden away behind the affability – a long career in espionage, for instance, or murder, or adultery. Only that charm is a way for a person not to be there. It stands in for character, and once character has been off duty for a few years, it may abscond completely and let someone else sign the cheques or deal with the person at the door.'

Max's case was even more difficult. Mary-Kay pays attention to the opinions of two people who spoke reverentially of Max's 'quasi-Buddhist ways':

“He was like a gardener tending his plants,” one said. “He knew that a tree doesn’t grow fast and that it will not produce fruit before its time.” The other one said the same, slightly differently: “He let the slow man move slowly; he let the fast man run. He often seemed to move in two directions at the same time.” Two directions at the same time! How tempting – now novelettish – to suggest that he was doing the same: keeping up with Freud, keeping up with Stalin. Is it entirely implausible? One thing is certain: he was secretive enough.’

Going deeper into the story with Plevitskaya and Skoblin, Mary-Kay hesitates to come to any conclusion, ‘It may just be that I want to find a story where none exists’. She chooses to point out what can be deduced and refuses to simplify or clarify anything:

‘On the one hand, there’s Max the impotent gasbag who, thanks to his money and his organizational skills, set psychoanalysis on its feet. On the other, there’s Max the art lover, the embodiment of European high culture, who secretly... No, probably not. But the mystery remains and I don’t see how it can go away.’

Indefiniteness and ambivalence do not embarrass her. The mystery is usually approached through paradoxes and ambivalence, just not many achieve this level.

The superbly written book has been translated into Russian [Уилмерс 2016]. While writing, Mary-Kay turned the raw material into literature, and I felt pity the translator could not follow her all the way up to perfection. The translation of the historical part is good but Mary-Kay’s delicate and highly sophisticated personal approach has lost a lot in Russian. Her intimate intonation, lightness, ambivalence suffered a great deal. In English you turn pages with fascination, in Russian the simplest things puzzle; for example, the expressions ‘in his terms’, ‘from my point of view’ sound like ‘from his/my belfry’ (с его колокольни, с моей колокольни). Mary-Kay Wilmers’ optics is precise and balanced.

We can approach it also from a different ground – closely looking at her criticism.

MASTERPIECES OF REVIEWING

From the very beginning, the *London Review of Books* stood strongly for the tradition of the literary and intellectual essay. The *LRB* has always

valued professionalism, the social relevance, the quality of writing. Karl Miller, founding editor, then professor of English at University College, London, made the paper’s content and approach more academic; Mary-Kay Wilmers – more various, more provocative, more ambivalent, more influential. The long essays of the *LRB* are a fusion of scholarship and art, seriousness and gaiety, tradition and innovation, risk-taking and winning. Colm Tóibín pointed out about the paper:

‘It simply created a style and an aura, and did so with considerable care and intensity. By reading the paper, you learned how to write for it. The style it created was serious but not stuffy; it required a great deal of thought and effort. You had to write clearly and try to be very intelligent, protecting yourself from the reader’s natural irony and the editor’s highly developed irony’ [Tóibín 2008: 124–125].

The word ‘simply’ sounds characteristic of the *LRB*: as if there is nothing easier than ‘simply create a style’...

John Lanchester gives examples of *LRB*-speak. They call the *LRB* ‘the paper’. ‘The things it publishes are always known not as reviews, essays, or articles, but pieces’ [Lanchester 2018: 1]. To me the word ‘pieces’ reflects the usual genre mix of the *LRB* (essays and reviews at once). It is a modest word, and at the same time it is closely connected to ‘masterpieces’: in everything the person writes, you feel the master’s touch, and can easily recognize her/his master-pieces. It is impossible to mistake Mary-Kay’s style, tenue, power to see anew things that may seem ordinary. At the same time, she likes basic things and words: she calls her book ‘the book’, her paper – ‘the paper’, her writings – ‘pieces’.

I hope the book *Human Relations and Other Difficulties* is the first step to Mary-Kay Wilmers’ *Complete Works*. It is valuable to have the collection of all her pieces.

Her piece/work on obituaries *Civis Britannicus Fuit* was written for *New Review* in April 1976. The first sentence determines a keynote – balanced, critical, humorous, convivial:

‘If the *Times* is still in any sense the institution it once was, it’s because of its letters page and its obituary column: the voice of the people (some of them) and the voice of God, a benign, very English God, or schoolmaster, not much interested

in foreign fiddle-faddle but ingenious in drawing up the end-of-term reports...'

Mary-Kay begins quoting from the obituary of Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, British ambassador to Turkey from 1939 to 1944 (died in 1971 at the age of 84). He did not belong to great people 'but his obituary was mindful of the interestingness of being that person, with those limitations, in the old unregenerate pre-scrambling time.'

The author points out that his obituary would have been written years before his death. Her comparative approach does sound weighty:

'If one compares current obituaries with those that were published twenty years ago what one notices first is that the notion of a state of grace – *civis Britannicus fuit* – has yielded to the more stringent doctrine of justification by works.'

Mary-Kay's lucidity of thought and elegant criticism are captivating. You like her remarks on the past ('heaven smiled on Englishmen, especially Englishmen of average ability'), the present:

'The gain in democracy has been achieved at the customary cost in style and idiosyncrasy; these largely disappeared with the shared feelings and values that had once made it possible to spell out the shortcomings...'

Careful obituary reading must have been an enjoyable pastime for her. She thoroughly analysed the material and put a number of question marks on many points; the wrong choice of words is one of them:

"With his natural dignity, quiet courtesy" – noisy courtesy? – ...

When the case is not so obvious she helps with correcting spelling and clarifying the idea, for instance:

'... "was invariably used in the course" – cause? – "of justice and tolerance..."'

As Inigo Thomas noticed, Mary-Kay 'watches other people's sentences with a rare intensity' [Thomas 2008: 49].

She makes the authors know how transparent their strategies are:

"It has been said by some who knew him and admired him" – the obituarist himself on another occasion? – ...'

Not unlike her witty 'metaphysical' predecessors, Mary-Kay Wilmers may take a word – and make it illuminating. She quotes 'this new age of scramble' and begins working/playing with 'scramble', pointing out 'pre-scramble values/

times and the new ones. Let's take allusions to writers or 'to the habit of reading': they were vital in 'the old unregenerate pre-scrambling time' but 'this cultural/culinary scrambled egg doesn't elicit a warm response in the now ageing age of scramble.'

'Another casualty of the age of scramble' is the family:

"Stock", which used to matter such a lot, has now, understandably, vanished from the obituarist's vocabulary.'

Mary-Kay Wilmers analyses the aim of the obituaries, their structure, the plot (or its main constituent parts), the use of paradox and antithesis. All the questions raised are valid and vital:

– 'How important is this truth-telling function where it concerns people's character, and how often does it become a liberty?'

– Why are writers particularly liable to malicious obituaries?

– What is 'the first business of an obituary writer'? I cannot but quote T. S. Eliot here (he complained to the *Times* that Joyce's obituary had been written by someone quite unsuited to the task – the *Times* declined to print his letter, and it was published in *Horizon*). It 'is to give the important facts about the life of the deceased, and to give some notion of the position which he enjoyed. He is not called upon to pronounce summary judgement (especially when his notice is unsigned), though it is part of his proper function, when his subject is a writer, to give some notion of what was thought of him by the best qualified critics of his time' [Wilmers 2018: 27].

Mary-Kay Wilmers explains why it is wrong to reprint obituaries from the *Times* in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The function of an obituary is not 'to assess achievements and assign merit' (as it is characteristic of an entry in a dictionary of biography) but 'to honour someone who may well receive no further honour.' The approach is functional and considerate as it is usual with Mary-Kay.

Advertising is also the sphere of her close interest. *Next to Godliness* is about Pears' soap and Thomas Barratt, who married Mary Pear, joined the Pears family business, and turned out to be an advertising genius. He made the soap a mass-marketing triumph in the 1860s. In 1897, under Barratt's direction, *Pears' Shilling Cyclopaedia* was published, and quickly earned its place

in Victorian households between the family Bible and the works of Dickens. It had gone through 88 editions when Mary-Kay Wilmers read a facsimile edition and analysed it from different perspectives ('No section of it is without interest').

The genre of the piece is not easy to define. Besides being an essay and a review, it is 'the compendium of a compendium, an instance of enriched documentary, written with style, charm and perspicacity,' as Jeremy Harding called it [Harding 2008: 132]. The article appeared in *New Yorker* in October 1979, and Mary-Kay had a personal thank-you note from William Shawn.

Different approaches to reviewing are thoroughly discussed in *The Language of Novel Reviewing* (1980). Mary-Kay Wilmers begins with classifying the review openings and different attitudes – both to the novel and practice of reviewing novels. She points out that 'there are ideologies of the novel and ideologies of the novel review, fictional conventions and reviewing conventions'. As usual, she is – using Peter Campbell's formula – 'at once serious and amusing' [Campbell 2008: 47]. Comparing a severe critical approach of Henry James' times and a contemporary kind one (because 'the novel is under pressure'), she shows the limitless boundaries of the reviewers' kindness:

'Kind to the old novelist because he is old; kind to the young novelist because he is young; to the English writer because he is English ('all quiet, wry precision about manners and oddities') and not American or German; to others because they are black (or white) or women (or men) or refugees from the Soviet Union. Every liberal and illiberal orthodoxy has its champions. <...> it sometimes seems as if novel reviewing were a branch of the welfare state.'

The recommendations of the finale may seem to be achievable:

'...what is wanted of a reviewer is much the same as what is wanted by the reviewer: a modest, unemphatic originality, a meticulous circumstantial account of the novel's merits, and a plausible (or should I say truthful?) response to them.'

'A modest, unemphatic originality' sounds easy but I've seen a number of confessions that after reading the article the reviewers felt like quitting reviewing. Mary-Kay's account of the clichés and drawbacks of overcoming them clearly shows your multifaceted faults.

Mary-Kay Wilmers' irony permeates everything. Sarcasm is invariably right. Her ear is perfect. In *Lady Rothermere's Fan*, a piece on *The Letters of Ann Fleming* edited by Mark Amory, Mary-Kay puts a cardinal question: why are we reading Ann Fleming's letters to Evelyn Waugh? Ann Fleming was witty and 'could create a conversational fizz'. At her parties 'no one wasted their time in banalities.' She enjoyed embarrassment and recorded with pleasure 'the gaffes that she and other people made.' Is it enough for her letters to be published? Mary-Kay points out 'there's an interest, of course, in all this tribal chit-chat, but however stylishly done, it doesn't exactly constitute a literary event.' 'It can't be said that there's anything in them that the world badly needs to know; and some people might find her tone of voice offensive.' Right priorities, style, wisdom and charm on page are marks of her 'unemphatic originality.'

One of the most important topics for Mary-Kay Wilmers is 'difficult' women. She gives quite a panorama of them:

Jean Rhys, Gladys Deacon, Liane de Pougy (*Narcissism and Its Discontents*);

Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell, Germaine Greer (*Hagiography*);

Christopher St John (Christabel Marshall), Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf (*Vita Longa*);

Ann Flemming (*Lady Rothermere's Fan*);

Barbara Skelton (*Quarrelling*);

Isabella Robinson (*Flirting is Nice*),

Marianne Moore and her mother (*What a Mother*).

Mary-Kay lets her heroines and heroes become vivid and extraordinarily memorable.

The main heroine of the essay *Death and the Maiden* (1981) is Alice James (1848-1892), the youngest and the only girl from five children of Henry James Sr. The eldest brothers, William James and Henry James, succeeded in life. Wilkie and Robertson did not (Robertson 'once said he thought he was a foundling').

Father was ambitious in his expectations of his children. His requirements were intangible: 'neither achievement nor success but "just" that they should "be something" ...' For Alice it was especially difficult:

'Her father took pleasure in her intelligence but did little to encourage it, and for most of her life she had a fierce sense of her capacities and an equally fierce sense of their not being wanted';

'Alice 'wasn't what her father said "woman" ought to be, a "form of personal affection", a lover and blessing of men...'

Seeing no way forward for herself, Alice turned into an invalid – to gain her share of parental and brotherly affection and attention. In 1889, Henry noticed of her, 'she only gets on so long as nothing happens.' Was it inevitable with her poor health? Did Alice trick nobody but herself when she started to limit her choices by being ill? Was Alice's father too selfish and oppressive, when he was not ready to 'sacrifice his pleasure in her company to her pleasure at independence'? Was Alice's mother her husbands's accomplice in this?

After Alice's death, William and Henry read her diary for the first time. The diary clearly constituted 'a new claim for the family renown,' but Henry, 'fearing some "catastrophe of publicity," didn't want it given 'to the world.' Only in 1964 was the full text published.

Two books were reviewed here: *Alice James: a Biography* by Jean Strouse (1980), and *The Death and Letters of Alice James* by Ruth Bernard Yeazell (1981). The representations are different, and Mary-Kay shows how the Alice in Yeazell's essay is her own worst enemy, whereas the Alice in Jean Strouse's book is rather a victim.

In 1993, a play *Alice in Bed* by Susan Sontag appeared. In 2012, Lynne Alexander wrote a novel *The Sister*. I would still recommend this review from 1981 for grasping the problems connected with the hard work of being a woman, the ways in which men may limit and frame women's life. It also helps to understand the James family ('Being a James was a complicated business'), Katherine Loring's devotion to Alice, her lack of doubt that Alice's diary was written for posterity to read.

There are essays about Peter Campbell (the designer and painter of the LRB), Leonid Eitington and Moscow, Brussels, but the women's issues are the main concern of the author (they have been for half a century). Mary-Kay edited *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970) by Eva Figes, the first feminist book. Stephen Frears, Mary-Kay's ex-husband, commented on mentioning this fact:

'I wasn't clever enough to see the political implication of such a book, and so couldn't see that she would eventually find the amount of courage

and resolution that she has found' [Frears 2008: 25–26].

The first essay of *Human Relations* is *I Was Dilapidated* (1972) where Mary-Kay shared her feelings on the birth of her son. Looking deeper the special triumphant joy of motherhood, she analysed what was not so attractive and welcome:

'I got depressed because instead of maternal goodness welling up inside me, the situation seemed to open up new areas of badness in my character.'

The essay was so personal that I was surprised to see that it was a review – of *Sex and Dehumanisation* by David Holbrook (the books reviewed are pointed out at the end of the article).

The books Mary-Kay discusses are challenging: *The Faber Book of Seductions* edited by Jenny Newman, *Journeys to the Underworld* by Fiona Pitt-Kethley, *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* by Germaine Greer.

Mary-Kay Wilmers says things that some would prefer were not said. Not many dare 'to be difficult,' and many are grateful for discussing 'difficult things.' I know nobody who could do it with such understanding, tact, and utmost quality.

TRIBUTES TO MARY-KAY WILMERS

In this part, I would like to direct attention to two more books. From *Bad Character. A Tribute to Mary-Kay Wilmers* I've already quoted a lot. The book was prepared for Mary-Kay's 70th birthday by her friends and colleagues. Nina Stibbe's book *Love, Nina* hasn't been mentioned so I'll introduce it first.

In 1982, twenty-year-old Nina Stibbe moved from Leicester to London to be a nanny to Mary-Kay Wilmers' sons – Sam (he was then ten and a half) and Will (then nine). *Love, Nina* is a collection of letters she wrote to her sister Victoria. Vic had no phone, so Nina's letters were regular and detailed. The sisters quite forgot about them, but much later, when moving house, the letters were found. In 2008, Andrew O'Hagan included the first piece in *A Tribute*. It went down a storm. Mary-Kay didn't want the letters to be published, and it was 4 years before she changed her mind.

Nina's story is written as one of a marvelously naive outsider with observational wit of what was going on in that remarkable house. Mary-Kay Wilmers strongly dislikes platitudes, so she

gave Nina a stern look the first time she asked if Mary-Kay had had a nice weekend. Never again did Nina speak for the sake of politeness, and affectionately recorded concise unpredictability of Mary-Kay (MK), Sam, and Will. Snippets of their talks sound like delightful mini plays.

‘Went Swimming. Got home.

MK: How was the swim?

Sam: It was OK.

Will: Great.

Me: Great.

Sam: Except I’m never going to trust her again.

MK: Why?

Sam: She pushed me in.

MK: (*a bit shocked*) You pushed him in?

Me: I had to.

MK: Why?

Me: He didn’t want to go in.

MK: Surely that’s a reason *not* to push him in?

Will: Unless it’s Sam.

Sam: Anyway. I’ll never trust her again.

Will: I haven’t trusted her since 1981.

Sam: You didn’t meet her till 1982.

Will: Well, there you are.

MK: (*to Sam*) So did you have a nice swim once she’d pushed you in?

Sam: It was OK, but my trust is lost.’ [Stibbe 2013: 117].

‘I’d not been a nanny before but felt sure it would be a nice life’ [Stibbe 2013: vii]. Nina had no idea how to cook, look after children, or who the famous people around were. She appeared pretty stubborn, but the answers to her were invariably helpful. Not only the guests of the house but even Nina’s wards were wise and casually brilliant with words:

‘Me: I’ve gone into a new sleep position.

Will: What is it?

Me: It’s like the recovery position (*I demonstrate*).

Will: So, are you still like that when you wake up?

Me: Um (*thinking*), no, I’m not, I think I go back into my old position.

Sam: What was your old position like?

Me: The foetal position.

Sam: What, with your feet up?

Me: No, *foetal*, like a baby in the mother’s tummy (*I demonstrate*).

Sam: Why have you changed?

Will: She was born.’ [Stibbe 2013: 279–280].

As Wendy Steiner mentioned, the conversation here ‘bristled as much as it glittered, and it glittered quite a bit’ [Steiner 2008: 38]. Nick Hornby, who ‘adored this book and could quote from it for ever,’ adapted *Love, Nina* for the series. It was also serialized on Radio 4. To me the book is like a guidance to everyday creativity with the language, among many other things.

Mary-Kay’s influence is astounding. Colm Tóibín was short in expressing the idea: ‘I wonder if she changed many people’s lives as she changed mine’ [Tóibín 2008: 124]. Judging by *A Tribute*, quite a lot. Colm Tóibín in his piece *The Importance of Not Being Earnest* describes Mary-Kay Wilmers’ ‘night life’:

‘When night fell she was good company. If you found yourself beside her at a table you were in for an evening of quite complicated jokes and a lot of laughter and an utter lack of earnestness. However, if you became earnest – and it is, I must admit, my only fault – then she could pounce on you. It must be hard working with pieces day after day, thinking up new ideas, finding new contributors, making the beautiful boys [the editorial young – *L. E.*] keep their heads down, balancing the paper, deciding what goes first and what goes in the middle sternly maintaining the astonishing standard. The night is for laughter’ [Tóibín 2008: 125].

Wendy Steiner in her piece *55 Gloucester Crescent* lets us feel the atmosphere of gatherings:

‘At the table one would find long-standing friends of Mary-Kay’s – inspiringly clear-edged people – along with an assortment of waifs of all ages and classes, miscellaneous souls in the process of finding themselves or divesting themselves of the selves they had previously found. Number 55 was like a chrysalis, and Mary-Kay was endlessly patient – and amused – at the embarrassments accompanying metamorphosis. It was quite extraordinary, over the years, to see so many awkward young lodgers end up as celebrated writers, fostered by the shelter and opportunities Mary-Kay provided’ [Steiner 2008: 39].

We see their testimonies, and now these people do (due to Mary-Kay’s school?) ‘undermine and confirm seriousness at the same time’ [Neve 2008: 32]. I would recommend John Uptown’s piece *On Not Minding*, demonstrating Wendy Steiner’s point: he visualised his ardent wish of

metamorphosis (he felt 'like the proverbial spare part' at her dinners), and, alas, 'tongue-tied embarrassment as salvos of conversation burst' [Upton 2008: 111].

Hilary Mantel expressed her gratitude to Mary-Kay Wilmers for many things, including being 'the most profound person,' 'one of the

small shadowy group of ideal readers,' 'a presiding genius, a guiding intelligence, as well as a most valued friend' [Mantel 2008: 15, 16].

With Mary-Kay Wilmers, I inevitable come to praise and a rhetorical question: what can be better than bringing together academic, creative, journalistic writing, and writing in people's lives?

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