

Anne Ridler and the Poetry of Life

Edward Short

Poetry might not seem the most persuasive means of changing minds in the debate over abortion. What was it Yeats said?

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,
The sentimentalist himself; while art is but a vision of reality.

Yet reality is at the heart of the abortion debate and even if poetry can offer only “a vision of reality,” it can still identify the abstractions that often falsify the debate.

One poet whose work is ideal for this purpose is Anne Ridler. Born in Warwickshire in 1912, the only daughter of Henry Christopher Bradby, a housemaster at Rugby, and his wife Violet Milford, Ridler went to Downe House (where Elizabeth Bowen was schooled), spent six months in Florence and Rome, and then took a diploma in journalism at King’s College, London in 1932.² Between 1935 and 1940, she worked at Faber and Faber as T. S. Eliot’s secretary. In her memoir, she recalled: “After reading through a pile of manuscripts he once confided, ‘Sometimes I feel I loathe poetry.’” In 1938, she married Vivian Ridler, Printer to the University of Oxford, with whom she had two sons and two daughters. Throughout her married life in Oxford, she and her family attended St. Mary’s Church, where Newman gave his great Anglican sermons. Ridler published 11 volumes of poetry over nearly 50 years; she also wrote verse dramas and, in her later years, librettos. For 30 years, she sang in the Oxford Bach Choir. She was also a peripheral member of the Inklings, the group surrounding C. S. Lewis that included J. R. R. Tolkien and Charles Williams. The chief contemporary influences on her work were Eliot, Auden, and Louis MacNeice. Like them, she was also influenced by Donne, Marvell, and the devotional poets of the 17th century, Herbert, Traherne, and Vaughan. The themes of her poetry are varied, rooted as they are in the family, and range from love and separation to the power of place, faith in God, marriage, the birth of children, and something that does not figure as much as it once did in poetry: the eternal. She died in 2001.

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In her poem "For a Child Expected," Ridler tills ground largely passed over in English poetry.³

Lovers, whose lifted hands are candles in winter,
Whose gentle ways like streams in the easy summer,
Lying together
For secret setting of a child, love what they do,
Thinking they make that candle immortal, streams forever flow,
And yet do better than they know.

So the first flutter of a baby felt in the womb,
Its little signal and promise of riches to come . . .

The poem captures the hopes that crowd the threshold of birth:

. . . whatever we liked we took:
For its hair, the gold curls of the November oak
We saw on our walk;
Snowberries that make a Milky Way in the wood
For its tender hands; calm screen of the frozen flood
For our care of its childhood.

But the birth of a child is an uncontrollable glory;
Cat's cradle of hopes will hold no living baby,
Long though it lay quietly.
And when our baby stirs and struggles to be born
It compels humility; what we began
Is now its own.

How different this celebration of the joys and obligations of pregnancy is to what one encounters at Planned Parenthood, which counsels pregnant women "to compare the benefits, risks, and side effects of each of your options. For example, both medication abortion and early vacuum aspiration are extremely safe. But current data suggest that medication abortion may carry a higher risk of death than early vacuum aspiration abortion. Even so, both procedures are much safer than abortion later in pregnancy or carrying a pregnancy to term." *Medication abortion, vacuum aspiration . . .* One has to wonder whether those who routinely use such language recognize that we have a moral obligation to eschew false witness. Eliot, with Dante in mind, said that one charge of poetry is "to purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight."⁴ Advocates of abortion use language

to mask their assault on the unborn. Ridler's poetry uses ordinary language with extraordinary precision to show how all our history and all our future unite in the unborn, how the birth of a child fuses foresight and aftersight.

Time and hope and moral responsibility necessarily figure in her understanding of these things. In "Christmas and Common Birth," Ridler considers why we celebrate the birth of Christ in December, a time usually associated with death.⁵

Christmas declares the glory of the flesh:
And therefore a European might wish
To celebrate it not at midwinter but in spring,
When physical life is strong,
When the consent to live is forced even on the young,
Juice is in the soil, the leaf, the vein,
Sugar flows to movement in limbs and brain.

To stress the strangeness of midwinter for such a celebration, Ridler describes what mothers-to-be experience, when

. . . before a birth, nourishing the child
We turn again to the earth
With unusual longing—to what is rich, wild,
Substantial: scents that have been stored and strengthened
In apple lofts, the underwash of woods, and in barns;
Drawn through the lengthened root; pungent in cones
(While the fir wood stands waiting; the beech wood aspiring,
Each in a different silence), and breaking out in spring
With scent sight sound indivisible in song.

Yet Ridler sees in the paradox of Christ's birth at what she calls "the iron senseless time" home truths that many choose to reject.

It is good that Christmas comes at the dark dream of the year
That might wish to sleep ever.
For birth is awaking, birth is effort and pain;
And now at midwinter are the hints, inklings
(Sodden primrose, honeysuckle greening)
That sleep must be broken.
To bear new life or learn to live is an exacting joy:
The whole self must waken; you cannot predict the way

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It will happen, or master the responses beforehand.
For any birth makes an inconvenient demand;
Like all holy things
It is frequently a nuisance, and its needs never end . . .

One of the first needs of a child is the need for a name. In naming our children, we name our hopes and dreams; we commemorate our dearest memories; we invoke the heroism of the saints and the wisdom of the prophets; we unite the living and the dead. In her poem "Choosing a Name," Ridler shows how names are a kind of poetry, a making—and, for the children they christen, a launching into history, which children remake.

My little son, I have cast you out
 To hang heels upward, wailing over a world
 With walls too wide.

My faith till now, and now my love:
 No walls too wide for all you hide.

I love, not knowing what I love,
 I give, though ignorant to whom
 The history and power of a name.

I conjure with it, like a novice
 Summoning unknown spirits: answering me
 You take the word and tame it.

To Ridler, names are not epistemological fictions but tokens of our faith and love.

Even as the gift of life
 You take the famous name you did not choose
 And make it new.

You and the name exchange a power:
 Its history is changed, becoming yours,
 And yours by this: who call this, calls you.

Maternal solicitude has rarely been given more moving expression. Where else in all our English poetry is there a prayer like this?

Strong vessel of peace, and plenty promised,
 Into whose unsounded depths I pour

This alien power;
Frail vessel, launched with a shawl for sail,
Whose guiding spirit keeps his needle-quivering
Poise between trust and terror,
And stares amazed to find himself alive;
This is the means by which you say *I am*,
Not to be lost till all is lost,
When at the sight of God you say *I am nothing*,
And find, forgetting name and speech at last,
A home not mine, dear outcast.

Beside this cry of love, the legalism of the advocates of “choice”—a cruel euphemism for the disposal of life—is more than a little inhuman. To appreciate Ridler’s poems about children and childbirth we have to step back and see them in some context.

When we think of English poetry about children we tend to think of Blake and Wordsworth. Ridler was influenced more by the childhood poems of Traherne and Vaughan.⁶ A century before Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), which began the vogue for treating childhood as a happy hunting ground for theory, Traherne urged that “we must disrobe ourselves of all false colors and un-clothe our souls of evil habits; all our thoughts must be infant-like and clear: the powers of our soul free from the leaven of this world, and disentangled from men’s conceits and customs.”⁷ Vaughan echoed this in one of his most famous poems, “The Retreat,” in which he wrote:

Happy those early days! When I
Shin’d in my Angel-infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, Celestial thought . . .⁸

Traherne and Vaughan took their view of childhood not from theorists but from Scripture. As Traherne wrote: “Our Savior’s meaning . . . [that] he must be born again and become a little child that will enter the Kingdom of Heaven is deeper far than is generally believed.” When Wordsworth and the Romantics began extolling the spiritual acuity of childhood in the early 19th century they were adopting the rather less reverent ideas of Rousseau, who saw children not so much as creatures made in the image of their Creator but as *tabulae rasae*, laboratory mice that could validate his educational theories.⁹

Lord Byron took the Swiss writer's measure rather unsparingly when he called him "the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau." Samuel Johnson was no kinder, calling him "a rascal, who ought to be hunted out of society."¹⁰ No one can read Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-89) without recognizing that the man most responsible for turning children into sentimental abstractions was unbalanced. He was also a hypocrite: In 1745, he set up house in a Paris hotel with a chambermaid with whom he proceeded to have several children, all of whom he summarily deserted. It was not from these that he derived his theories about the inherent goodness of children. No sooner were they born than he sent them off to foundling hospitals, despite the protests of their mother.¹¹

Notwithstanding Rousseau's theorizing and Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" (1807), with its famous claim that "The Child is Father of the Man," the Victorians rejected the notion that children were the source of all goodness. In rejecting one fallacy, however, they adopted another. Max Beerbohm gives a vivid picture of the Victorian nursery. "Children were not then recognized as human creatures. They were a race apart; savages that must be driven from the gates; beasts to be kept in cages; devils to whose voices one must not listen. Indeed, the very nature of children was held to be sinful. Lies and sloth, untidiness and irreverence, and a tendency to steal black currant jam, were taken to be its chief constituents. And so nurseries . . . were the darkened scene of temporal oppression, fitfully lightened with the gaunt reflections of hell-fire."¹² The novels of Dickens corroborate this, as do Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and Sir Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907). And yet what chilling significance Beerbohm's words have acquired! "*Children were not then recognized as human creatures . . .*"

Upper-class nurseries might have had something penal about them but they were little paradises compared to what awaited children of the slums. Lady Violet Bonham Carter, the daughter of the Liberal prime minister H. H. Asquith, and one of the last standard-bearers of Liberalism in England, wrote about "the tortures of commercial exploitation to which the children of the poor were mercilessly sacrificed in the mills and in the mines during the Industrial Revolution, little more than a hundred years ago." (She was writing in 1947.) Children from the slums and workhouses of London were sent up to the mill-owners in cartloads from the age of seven and put at the mercy of their masters until they were 21. Lady Violet found these practices odious.

That many of the enlightened philanthropists, humanitarians, and reformers who had fought for the abolition of slavery in the British Dominions, should have tolerated and defended the slavery of children in the factories and mines of England appears to

us to-day fantastically inexplicable. We must, I suppose, accept the explanation that they were deluded fatalists, bowing to what they believed to be melancholy economic necessity. They were convinced that poverty was inevitable and incurable and that any interference with economic processes could only result in disaster for all mankind. This belief may explain their callous acceptance of industrial suffering in the factories and mines. It cannot explain their refusal to protect the child chimney-sweeps—the “Climbing Boys”—whose fate Lord Shaftesbury declared to be ten times worse than that of the factory children . . . It was not until 1875 . . . that Lord Shaftesbury at last succeeded in carrying this bill which brought these horrors to an end.¹³

With this chastening precedent lodged in her mind, Lady Violet might have become an influential defender of children, especially when their very survival was endangered by the abortion bill that David Steel introduced into the House of Lords in 1967. But she chose a different course, as her diary proves.

Monday 17 July: Went to H. of L. Abortion alas! Comes on Wed . . . Met Frank (Longford) who is passionately against it & engaged me in an argument about it . . . Appalled at David Steel producing a foetus (half an inch long) in the H. of C!¹⁴ “What wld your father have felt?” I said he wd have been deeply interested. I have never seen Frank so near real anger! . . .

Wednesday 19 July: Abortion debate. Opened by Lord Silkin . . . Then (a body blow) my dear Archbishop [Michael Ramsey]. He began by saying that the present laws of Abortion were shockingly bad—& urgently needed reform. But there were certain features of the present Bill he cld not support & he therefore felt obliged to abstain on the second reading. [Later, Lady Violet was quoted in the *Daily Mail* as telling Ramsey, “Michael, I never thought of you as a moral coward.”] I felt despair because his leadership in this issue is so vital . . . However, to my amazement and relief when the division was called it did go through—overwhelmingly! It had been a thinnish House throughout & the majority of the speakers had either had fierce indictments from the R.C. lobby (who turned out and spoke in force) or critical and half-hearted support . . . Of the R.C.’s Frank Longford made the most violent & the worst speech I thought. He usually lacks indignation to a fault—but this Bill really inflamed him & he dragged in Euthanasia & all sorts of other irrelevancies . . .¹⁵

To compare these entries with Lady Violet’s earlier passage decrying Victorian heartlessness is to be reminded of Mrs. Jellyby, the reformer in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-3) who is so busy interfering in the lives of other people’s children that she neglects her own.¹⁶ If Lady Violet was so appalled by the treatment doled out to the children forced to sweep chimneys—Charles Lamb called them “these dim specks, poor blots, innocent blacknesses”—why could she not see the far more horrifying treatment that legalized abortion would dole out to the unborn?¹⁷ The Victorians had no monopoly on moral blindness. Legalized abortion in England and America shows the callousness of our own attitude towards children, which, for all

our protesting otherwise, links us more than we care to admit to the ruthless slave-drivers of Victoria's age.

This is why Anne Ridler matters as a poet. She reminds us of truths that have been forgotten by those who continue to see children in unreal, abstract, expendable terms. In "For a Christening," Ridler celebrates the reality of love in the life of the newborn. If she is prepared to affirm reason's ability to grasp reality, she is not oblivious to the mysteriousness of life. Addressing the newborn, she says:

Distinguished stranger to whom we offer food and rest;
Yet made of our own natures; yet looked for with such longing.
Helpless wandering hands, the miniature of mine,
Fine skin and furious look and little raging voice—
Your looks are full human, your qualities all hidden . . .

The close attention she pays her growing boy in her poem "A Matter of Life and Death" reinforces the sense of mystery that children nurture in all of us.

Down the porphyry stair
Headlong into air
The boy has come: he crouches there
A tender startled creature
With fawn's ears and hair-spring poise
Alert to every danger
Aghast at every noise . . .
And perfect as his shell-like nails,
Close as are to the flower its petals,
My love unfolded with him.
Yet till this moment what was he to me?
Conjecture and analogy;
Conceived, and yet unknown;
Behind this narrow barrier of bone
Distant as any foreign land could be.

The wonder of children is their perennial gift:

His smiles are all largesse,
Need ask no return,
Since give and take are meaningless
To one who gives by needing

And takes our love for granted
And grants a favor even by his greed.
The ballet of his twirling hands
His chirping and his loving sounds,
Perpetual expectation
Perpetual surprise—

The mysteriousness of life is deepened by time. In the epigraph to her poem “2 October 1983,” Ridler quotes Thomas McFarland on Coleridge: “The eyes looking out from our time-eroded bodies are the lights of a soul that does not change.” Ridler’s sense of the sanctity of life is always uppermost in her sense of its preciousness. Addressing her husband after 40 years of marriage, she writes:

Once I recalled in a poem
Your hopeful infant gaze repeated
In the lover whom I cherished,
But could not see old age.
Seeing it now, I wonder
At the joyful mystery
That a man’s life should age him
Yet leave him still the same,
And cherished, honored, ever.

What the writer of this poem would have thought of any “hopeful infant gaze” being denied life to make way for “reproductive rights” is not difficult to imagine. But then Ridler must have found much that was dismaying in a world where to honor and to cherish had become empty vows. Here we encounter again the theme of words. They meant a good deal to the woman who took the rigorous Eliot as her mentor. The double-talk behind the arguments for abortion could only have been anathema to her.¹⁸ In this, she concurred with Ben Jonson, who recognized that “wheresoever manners and fashions are corrupted, language is. It imitates the public riot. The excess of feasts and apparel are the notes of a sick state; and the wantonness of language of a sick mind.”¹⁹ The force of Ridler’s poetry inheres in its precision. Most of us discover that love is knowledge by the grace of God; here the discovery is expressed with a radiant succinctness.

Where are the poems gone, of our first days?
Locked on the page

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Where we for ever learn our first embrace.
Love come of age
Takes words as said, but never for granted
His holy luck, his pledge
That what is truly loved is truly known.
Now in that knowledge
Love unillusioned is not love disenchanting.

Here, I will end with a poem about another christening, a work that epitomizes the pro-life power of this unjustly neglected poet.

Choir, candles, kindred faces,
Isobel goes in a gaggle of children,
'Issued from the hand of God'
To a plentiful drench of holy water,
Unprotesting, unperturbed.
Tiny chrysalis, lapped in shawl,
So parceled, signed, and answered for.
But heart to heart against my shoulder
What I hold is something different:
Life beating with secret purpose;
What I see, face to face,
Is recognition,
Spark of the eternal light.

NOTES

1. This is from Yeats' poem "Ego Dominus Tuus," (1917), from *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Macmillan, London, 1956. p. 157.
2. Bowen wrote a witty essay about her school days at Downe House, which she attended from September 1914. Speaking of her young self and her classmates, she says: "We cannot really have been emotional girls; we were not highly-sexed and any attractions had an aesthetic, snobbish, self-interested tinge. Conversations over the radiator were generally about art, Roman Catholicism, suicide, or how impossible somebody else had been. At nine o'clock a bell rang from the matron's room and we all darted back to our bedrooms and said our prayers." Later, when she returned to the place, she was dismayed to find that it had been turned into a shrine to Charles Darwin (he had lived in the house and died there before it became a school). "I have never liked scientific people very much," she admits, "and it mortifies me to think of them trampling reverently around there on visiting days, thinking of Charles Darwin and ignorant of my own youth." See "The Mulberry Tree" (1934) in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Hermione Lee, New York, 1987.
3. All quotations from Ridler's poems are from Anne Ridler, *Collected Poems*, Manchester, 1997.
4. This is from "Little Gidding" (1942), one of the *Four Quartets* which Eliot composed between 1936 and 1942.
5. Clement of Alexandria ventured May 20th as the date of Christ's birth; the 25th of December

- was only settled on in the later 4th century. For a trenchant look at the history of the Nativity, see G.K. Chesterton's "The History of Christmas," which first appeared in *G.K.'s Weekly* on December 26, 1935.
6. It might be helpful to furnish dates for these poets. Henry Vaughan (1621-95); Thomas Traherne (1637-74); William Blake (1757-1827); and William Wordsworth (1770-1850).
 7. Thomas Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Thanksgivings*, edited by Anne Ridler, Oxford, 1966. This quotation comes from "The Third Century," one of his long meditative prose poems, p. 266.
 8. Henry Vaughan. *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, Edited by L.C. Martin, Oxford, 1957, p. 419.
 9. To be fair, Rousseau's ideas on education were not entirely bad. As R.G. Collingwood pointed out, "Rousseau's conception of education depends on the doctrine that the child, undeveloped though he may be, has a life of his own, with his own ideals and conceptions and that the teacher must understand and sympathize with this life, treat it with respect, and help it to develop in a way proper and natural to itself. This conception, applied to history, means that the historian must never do what the Enlightenment historians were always doing, that is, regard past ages with contempt and disgust, but must look at them sympathetically and find in them the expression of genuine and valuable human achievements. Rousseau was so much carried away by this idea as to assert (in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*) that primitive savagery is superior to civilized life [hence my charge that the effect of his theories was to *sentimentalize* children]; but that primitive savagery he later withdrew," though not before the damage had already been done in terms of his influence. One can clearly see that influence in multiculturalism's refusal to discriminate between the savage and the civilized, and its occasional tendency to exalt the savage and denigrate the civilized. See Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev.ed., Oxford, 1994, p. 87.
 10. See Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Ed. by George Birbeck Hill and L.F. Powell, Vol. II, Oxford, 1934, p. 12. Rousseau was eventually hounded out of France and given sanctuary in England by David Hume, with whom, however, he eventually quarreled.
 11. See Paul Johnson's essay on Rousseau in his brilliant book, *Intellectuals*, New York, 1988, pp. 1-27.
 12. Max Beerbohm. "A Cloud of Pinafores," in *More*, New York, 1922, p. 195.
 13. This is from an essay entitled "Childhood and Education" that Bonham Carter contributed to a book of essays edited by the once famous (now largely forgotten) intellectual historian Ernest Barker called *The Character of England*, Oxford, 1947, p. 221
 14. According to Mark Pottle, the editor of Bonham Carter's diaries: "Steel produced the seven-week-old embryo when moving the third reading of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Abortion) bill, after an all-night sitting of the Commons 13-14 July, 1967. He used it to emphasize the point that the bill allowed for abortion only at an early stage in pregnancy, before the embryo could be said to have a human form: 'This is what we are weighing against the life and welfare of the mother and family' (*Hansard* vol. 750, col 1347)." Lady Violet should have found Steel's show-and-tell appalling for its moral obtuseness, not its grisliness.
 15. From *Daring to Hope: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1946-1969*, ed. by Mark Pottle, London, 2000, pp. 318-319. To answer the question put to Lady Violet about what her father would have felt about abortion: He would have abominated it. (Her response, that he would have found it interesting, is tell-tale evasion.) Asquith might have been over-fond of brandy and of playing bridge while tens of thousands of his countrymen were blown to bits in the trenches but he was not an unconscionable man. He was also well-educated enough (City of London School, Balliol) to identify sophistry when he saw it. He would not have seen any compelling logic in the proposition that we must kill the unborn to make the world safe for professional abortionists.
 16. It is typical of Dickens's optimism that he should have drawn Mrs. Jellyby's eldest daughter Caddy, who bears the brunt of her mother's madcap philanthropy, as the quintessential survivor. Chesterton called her "by far the greatest, the most human, and the most really dignified of all the heroines of Dickens."
 17. See "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" by Charles Lamb. *Essays of Elia and Last Essays*, Oxford, 1961, p. 157.
 18. Here is a typical piece of double-talk from the still influential Labour historian, Kenneth O. Morgan from his survey, *The People's Peace: British History 1945-1989*, Oxford, 1990, p. 260: "The campaign to have abortion legalized made similar progress [to the campaign to have

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sodomy legalized], and David Steel passed a bill to this effect in 1967, despite pressure from Roman Catholic and other religious lobbies. Henceforth, the terrors of back-street abortions and other non-professional ways of terminating pregnancies could be avoided." The resolute use of the passive, the dreary euphemism, the rhetorical puerility of this sentence speaks volumes about the defenders of infanticide.

19. Ben Jonson. *The Complete Poems*, edited by George Parfitt, Penguin, 1975. p. 403. This is from a long discursive prose piece that Jonson wrote called *Timber: Or Discoveries* about poetry, language, society, and other and other related matters, drawn from his reading.



"If I didn't believe so strongly in the separation of church and state, I'd call the cops."