



Elinor Wylie

(1885-1928)

Puritan Sonnet (1928)

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones
There's something in this richness that I hate.
I love the look, austere, immaculate,
Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones.
There's something in my very blood that owns
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,
A thread of water, churned to milky spate
Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.

I love those skies, thin blue or snowy gray,
Those fields sparse-planted, rendering meager sheaves;
That spring, briefer than apple-blossom's breath,
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay,
Swift autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,
And sleepy winter, like the sleep of death.

ANALYSIS

There are two kinds of aesthetic temperament: one tends to identify beauty, in Nature or in art, with the sumptuous, the luxuriant, the gorgeous, the resplendent; the other finds it mainly in the simple, the chaste, the unadorned, the restrained. One sees supreme beauty in the bird of paradise or the macaw; the other prefers the trim lines of the swallow or the wren. One built the ornate, richly decorated churches of Renaissance and eighteenth-century Europe; the other built the simple white churches of New England.

The speaker in this sonnet, as its first line and its expression of fondness for "slanted pastures fenced with stones" tell us, is an actual or spiritual New Englander, a descendant of the Puritans. She is standing amidst a landscape of tropical or subtropical or southern richness. Her Puritan blood rebels against this luxuriance, and she expresses her preference for landscapes that are "austere, immaculate...bare...cold..."

thin...sparse...meager.” The poem pivots on the phrases “I hate,” “I love,” and in telling us what she loves she gives us vignettes of typical New England scenes.

The last four lines take us through the four seasons of the year, with emphasis not only on their chaste New England beauty, but on their brevity. By implication they contrast with the single, unchanging season of the tropics, and remind us that the evanescence of delicate beauty is one thing that makes it so precious.

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with James M. Reid