Bard of Her Tribe

by

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A newspaper editor rang me earlier this year and asked me to interview Judith Wright, the well known conservationist.

"You mean the poet", I said.

"No", he said, "I mean the woman who is president of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. She's trying to stir up this new Department of the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts. Find out what she's up to."

I had known for a long time that Judith Wright was both poet and public figure, but I had always regarded her as something for the literary, not the news pages. As a schoolboy I grew up on her poetry, clipping it, when it was first published, from the pages of the Bulletin and Meanjin and pasting it in a fat exercise book. Later I was to review a number of her books and hear her at poetry readings and public lectures. But for twenty years I had known her only as a poet. On that freezing Canberra night, however, I met the conservationist.

Perched bird-like on an armchair at the home of another poet, Dorothy Auschterlone, she said, "I'm wearing both my hats tonight: conservationist for this interview, then poet for my talk to the Canberra Fellowship of Australian Writers".

It was soon evident that she should have also been wearing another, for Judith Wright is something else: a practised politician. In this break from her university job in Queensland she was lecturing in Canberra and she realised that here she had an opportunity to raise her voice effectively in the cause of conservation and be heard in the federal sphere of government.

"I'm interested in three things", she said in her thin, piping voice, "the arts, the Aborigines and the environment — and now they've lumped them all together in a junior ministry that's practically powerless.

"The environment is the most urgent problem of the three because neither the arts nor the Aborigines will survive unless we get to grips with the task of saving it. In January, 1970, I wrote a pleading, open letter to the Prime Minister of Australia and the Premier of Queensland. I gave them a list of probable disasters and asked them to act. Last year seemed to be a year of improvement but all we really got was what we're getting now: a bit of lip service and a junior ministry."

She paused, peered apologetically through her thick-lensed spectacles, and said, "I try not to be a doom-watcher, but you can't help feeling more than anxious about the way the country is going. The only thing that is going to save it is to reverse completely the attitudes we have now. And I see no sign of that.

"We're all pollutants, but everyone blames everyone else. We talk a lot about it but when it comes to doing something like giving up a car, or not buying something that pollutes, or paying more for anti-pollution measures built into a manufactured article there are very few people who don't yell at the prospect."

Miss Wright neither looks nor sounds like the professional doom-watcher, who these days tends to be a soave technocrat mouthing the platitudes of the power elite. Small, greying, in her mid-fifties, and growing harder of hearing every year, she may use some of the doom-watcher's Rotarian rhetoric but she does so with the quiet intensity of the lyric poet. She sounds convincing because she is convinced.

A fifth-generation Australian who has written an absorbing history of her landed family in Generations of Men, she has always lived close to the earth — first in New England and later in the Queensland bush — and has cherished her country with an obsessive love.

I have sketched this worldly, involved, political Judith Wright because, as she will readily admit, people today see the poet as a dreamer, a person apart, a survival of more primitive times. They believe that poetry is a form of communication no longer needed by modern man. It is important to realise, therefore, that although she is primarily and centrally a poet, Judith Wright is also very much a part of our social and political life.
on the Banks, of an ill-found ship, bad food, a grumbling crew, a storm, and a final wreck in an icefield. Then come the Phlebas lines that we know. Eliot told the Paris Review that the passage was suggested by the Ulysses episode in Dante, though there also appear to be echoes of The Ancient Mariner and a few hints of Tristan Corbiere. Within The Waste Land, the passage has links with the dory fisherman of I. 220 (and Note), with the fishermen of Lower Thames Street (I. 260), and with the general theme of the Fisher King. In the larger body of Eliot's verse, it recalls Marina, Cape Ann, and The Dry Salvages. Had it been allowed to stand, it would have linked the Phoenician of ancient times with the sailors Eliot had himself known on the eastern American seaboard. It would have added new dimensions to the poem — the dimension of everyday men's work, the dimension of hardship and physical danger, and the open ocean as opposed to the sheltered waters of the Thames. Eliot himself had done a lot of small boat sailing in his youth.

"O.K. from here on I think", wrote Pound at the beginning of Part V, and the rest of the poem down to "Shantih shantih shantih" is much as we know it.

These three major cuts amount to some 200 lines of verse, or the equivalent of about half The Waste Land as published: a significant reduction. It is rash to try to evaluate what Pound did to the poem so soon, but one may venture a few suggestions. There are things to be said in favour of all the cancelled passages. The night on the town in Boston reinforces the impression of futility that we get from Marie: it is the same theme played, as it were, in a different key and with variations. The Fresca episode adds depth to the sketch of the world of the rich in "A Game of Chess", and further spells out the idea that culture is becoming sapless and debased. The fishing voyage, as remarked, recalls the Ulysses episode in Dante, with its message: that all human endeavour without Grace is doomed to destruction. All three sections, like much of the rest of The Waste Land, show us a sterile world where sexuality and labour come to nothing, a world that needs salvation and cannot find it.

But the poem also gains from the omissions. One might well say that the emptiness of Marie's kind of life, or the typist's, is clear enough without Donavan and Gus Kruitzsch and Fresca. One might think that the Phlebas passage — which Pound insisted on retaining — is sufficiently poignant and effective without drowning an extra shipload of American cod-fishers. One might also think that Tiresias has enough to do representing all the men and all the women in the poem (see Note on I. 218) without incorporating half a dozen others as well. What the poem may have lost in variety it gained in density and abrupt dramatic power. Pound seems to have made some cost/benefit calculations and concluded that the omitted passages added to the bulk of the material without sufficiently enriching it.

Two further points may be made. Readers of poetry today still often tacitly accept the Romantic myth that poetry is a matter of sudden inspiration, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". The Waste Land drafts indicate that such a view needs a great deal of qualification. The making of a poem turns out to be a much more complicated process. No one doubts that Eliot put a great deal of himself and his personal life into The Waste Land, but for all that it was no straightforward overflow of feelings. He was already planning a "long poem" in November, 1919, two full years before he submitted the drafts to Ezra Pound. He already had the figure of Fresca in mind when he wrote Gerontion (1919), and the theme of death by water haunted him for decades. It is already present in Prufrock (1910-1911), in Mr. Apollinary (1915), and of course in Dans le Restaurant (1916-17). Fragments from the suppressed passages of "Death by Water" turn up in Marina (1930) and The Dry Salvages (1941).

And as we have seen, the published Waste Land was not even entirely Eliot's work. Pound played an important part in shaping the final version, and he also made detailed criticisms of diction and style. In the Typist scene, for example, Eliot originally wanted to have the carbuncular young man urinate and spitt when he got to the bottom of those unlit stairs.

"Probably (sic) over the mark", scrawled Ezra Pound in the margin, though he was not a fastidious writer himself (see Cantos, XIV). These facts, besides dozens of minor changes made in drafting and redrafting show clearly enough that the idea of the poet who merely "looks into his heart and writes" is naive and simplistic.

Finally, one may ask, what light do the drafts throw on the much-discussed question of the unity of The Waste Land? Some of the early reviewers held that it was not so much a work as a medley — even "a mad medley", according to one of them. What was to be made of this formidable mélange of quotations in four or five languages, of these scraps of Buddha and St. Augustine and the Spanish, and of Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston presiding over it all?

Was The Waste Land even "a poem"? Or was it a collection of Imagist fragments heaped together? In the thirties and later, academic critics applied their learning and their ingenuity to finding patterns and a meaningful whole, but they did not all agree together on what this meaningful whole might be, or what it might signify. No consensus opinion ever appeared finally to silence the sceptics. Perhaps it will be seen from the foregoing paragraphs that the sections that Pound edited out do little to resolve this question. The unity of The Waste Land in terms of both matter and manner is still as open to debate as ever.
Like all poets, she is in a way a survival of more primitive times. She is the bard of her tribe. The immediate reward we as Australians get from her poetry is a better understanding of our own land and times, the feel of what it means to be Australian. Miss Wright herself reverses this view: "The fact is that modern man is something like a survival of poetry, which once shaped and interpreted his world through language and the creative imagination. When poetry withers in us the greater part of experience and reality wither too; and when this happens we live in a desolate world of facts, not of truth — a world scarcely worth the trouble of living in."

But as well as being an interpreter of Australia Miss Wright, like most of our poets, is deeply conscious of being part of the mainstream of Western culture. Her job is not only to explain Australia to Australians but also to explain man to men. "Poetry", she has written, "is concerned with what drives deepest into the soul."

A poet, she says, "is more like a kind of self-acting kaleidoscope arranging and rearranging bright scraps of experience into different shapes and patterns in an attempt to make a new kind of unity and meaning. What occupies him most is not the question, 'Why did it happen?' or 'How did it happen?' but rather, 'What does it mean to me that it happened?'"

Judith Wright is as conscious of her dual role as poet as she is of her poet-public roles. She has addressed herself to the Australian experience in many of her poems and in her fine critical history of Australian poetry, but when she is at her best she is addressing mankind as a whole. She is being both an Australian and a representative of Western culture.

In her essay, "Australia's Double Aspect", she examines the conflict between the transplanted European's idea of the world and the strange reality that confronted him in a land where trees shed their bark not their leaves, where soil and climate, and the strange alternation of drought and flood, made nonsense of farmers' efforts to till the land. The European, she contends, finally won the battle for the land, overcame its emptiness, its sameness, its distances and extremes of climate with endurance, persistence, home-made ingenuity, and a sardonic attitude to failures and reverses. But in winning he also lost something. Back in Europe he had something else to sustain him, "the sense of belonging to a tradition, of sharing in a long inheritance of achievement both of mind and heart which is symbolised in the names of countries, England, France, Italy, Greece, and which formed for him a kind of interpretation and framework for his own life and himself, his landscape and his cities."

But in Australia this sense of a shared culture which gave life a meaning beyond the personal, by linking a man with the past, lost its power over him. "For the true function of an art and a culture is to interpret us to ourselves, and to relate us to the country and society in which we live."

The process of interpreting ourselves is well under way and Miss Wright has played a big part in it. Since the forties, for example, she has been the greatest living poet of the Australian landscape. She burst upon the literary scene with a series of lyrics about New England which presented a very personal view of the country and at the same time tried to link it with its past. Here, for example, are the opening lines of "South of My Days":

South of my day's circle, part of my blood's country,
risers that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite — clean, lean, hungry country.

For her it is a country "full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep" and this legendary element fascinated her as much as the scene on which she gazed.

Poems such as "Northern River", "Bora Ring", "Trapped Dingo", "Country Town", "South of My Days", and "Bullocky" are elegiac in tone, nostalgic laments for a lost past, for what was wild and elemental in the Australian landscape. Together they create a myth of a golden age transcending history. Through them she is searching for ways to re-establish man's contact with his aboriginal situation. She laments the loss of innocence and primeval freshness but always discovers, as most literature written in the Judeo-Christian tradition does, a paradise regained after a paradise lost.

But for all its solid imagery drawn from everyday experience and the visible landscape, there is an apocalyptic vision in Judith Wright's poetry that raises the best of her verse to a universality that links it with Western culture as a whole. In her first volume of verse, The Moving Image (1946) she announced the themes that were to run through the rest of her work. Like Plato, she saw time as a moving image of eternity, she saw man as a speck on its endless track, sustained by love, made happy by birth and sad by life's evanescence. In her poetry she is haunted always by the spectre of death drawing his cords in. Moreover, she was aware even in her earliest poetry that there were dualities within herself: her two halves, for example — the woman engaged in daily life, the poet toiling in the strange landscape of the night; and others such as time and eternity, the flesh and the spirit.

In reviewing Australia's contributions to its own self-realisation Judith Wright has singled out as peculiarly Australian the idea that men are God-created equals: "Where the American dream made use of the competitive individualistic element in life, the freedom of any man to become richer and better than his fellows by hard work and emulation, the Australian dream emphasises man's duty to his brother, and man's basic equality, the mutual trust that makes society cohere."

Judith Wright's own special contribution to this dream has also been her special contribution to Western culture. At the root of it all she sees the power of love, "that summary of collective law of nature . . . impressed by God upon the original particles of all things, so as to make them attack each other and come together." At first she was optimistic about love's power. Indeed, her most famous poem, "Woman to Man" is partly a celebration of it. Poem after poem
celebrates love in many forms, the love between husband and wife, between mother and daughter, between man and woman.

But after years of confident praise of love Miss Wright began to have reservations about it, even misgivings, and it is important to note that it was about this time that there was a marked decline in the quality of her work. The two striking volumes of the forties, _The Moving Image_ (1946) and _Woman in Man_ (1949), were followed by the two mediocre books of the fifties, _The Gateway_ (1953) and _The Two Fires_ (1955).

Their language is vague, general and platitudinous; the poems no longer seek the meaning behind the concrete situations. It would seem that in her loss of confidence in love Judith Wright lost her way. The poems are five-finger exercises, many of them on standard poetic topics: "Eden", "Song for Winter", "Sonnet for Christmas", "Song for Easter" and so on. She is aware of her "speech remote, the note not right", aware, too, that she was never quite sure what she was saying.

It was not until _Five Serpents_ (1963) that she began to find herself and her inspiration again. In that book and in _The Other Half_ (1966) she reassessed and explored the creative process. She found her old passion returning as she left nature and the bush and returned to the world of men.

During her period in the wilderness scene of her ideas were tested severely. She had become even more conscious that "Time seeks eternity. The flesh continually works towards its ending" but had found a partial resolution in resignation: "Time's not for weeping. Time and the world press on. So take life further".

But her faith in love was more severely shaken. Many of her most moving poems record the sad course of love in marriage and of motherly love. In the end she realised that love was still all-important but it was also painful and dangerous, as well as being precarious, and her late affirmations of its power are fiercely desperate. The land of love is mined, the tripwire's waiting, she says.

Indeed, the world itself is more out of joint than she ever expected and time, she found, was drawing its condoms tighter. Turning fifty, she is still able to toast the new day's sun optimistically, if a little sarcastically, in an early morning cup of coffee, but in "Portrait" she realises that housekeeping, like love itself, has now become a habit.

There is little doubt that Judith Wright has been passing through a personal crisis but in doing so the poet in her has been reborn. In her heart-rendering recent poems she is writing at the peak of her powers and with great emotion about her personal life but at the same time has become a public poet of considerable power, expressing with savagery, for example, her detestation of war. It is with an excerpt from one of those later poems that I would like to end this article. It is from a poem written for her deceased husband:

_The maze we travel has indeed its centre, There is a source to which all time's returned._
_That was the single truth your learning learned; and I must hold to that, who cannot enter, who move uncertainly and now alone._
_What I remember of you makes reply._
_Your eyes, your look, remain, all said and done, the guarantee of blessing, now you're gone._
_Time may be guiler, set until we die; but you were guiled, and made your breakaway._
_And left a truth, a triumph, as you went, to prove the path. I touched you where you lay (for it was not goodbye I had to say) and made a kind of promiss. What it meant was: I am only 1, as I was you; but you were man, and man is more than man —_ is central to the maze where all's made new. _That was the end the path bid led you to, the turning search that ends where it began yet grows beyond itself into the vision; blinded, yet moving with a blind precision, because the end is there, the answer's true._