Biography

Wright was born May 31, 1915, and raised outside Armidale in Australia’s most populous state, New South Wales. She grew up in the rural Australian landscape, the oldest child of three in a well-off and literate family. Wright was fortunate enough to spend her childhood reading a great deal, especially poetry, which her mother had read to her since Wright was very young. Wright’s first formal education was through correspondence courses furnished by the New South Wales government to those in rural areas. This afforded the young Wright the advantage of lessened regimentation, a trait often advantageous to a career in poetry. At twelve, the year her mother died, Wright attended the New South Wales Girls’ School and there met a teacher who encouraged her to write poetry.

In 1933, Wright, now a teenager, left school. However, she did take one class at the University of Sydney. The light schedule enabled her to read heavily and widely outside class requirements. At twenty-two, Wright traveled through Europe and later, Sri Lanka. The next few years saw her at an array of office jobs, the last as an assistant to a geography professor. With the onset of World War II, she returned home to help out on the family property. In 1943, Wright, now twenty-eight, joined the administrative staff of the University of Queensland. Here, she helped the editor of Meanjin produce what would become Australia’s most influential literary magazine. In 1946, the editor of Meanjin published Wright’s first book of poems, The Moving Image, a major success in Australian poetry. Two years before, Wright had met her husband, the philosopher J. P. McKinney, who was a large influence on Wright’s work. Before McKinney died in 1966, he and Wright became the parents of one daughter.

Wright has published numerous books of poems, including The Gateway (1953), which contains her acclaimed “Drought Year.” She has also published children’s literature and short stories, edited anthologies of poetry, recorded her family’s history, and written in the field of conservation. In 1962, she became cofounder and president of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Queensland and served as its president several times thereafter. In this capacity she was instrumental in the effort to save The Great Barrier Reef located off Australia’s northeastern coast.

The recipient of numerous important honorary doctorates and awards, Wright eventually garnered Australia’s most prestigious literary prize, the Australia-Britannica Award for Literature. In 1970, she was made a fellow in the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the only member elected on the basis of a literary career alone. She also traveled to Canada and India as a representative of the writers of her country, and guest-lectured at numerous universities. In 1992, Wright won the Queen’s Prize for Poetry, and in 1995, the Human Rights for Poetry Award, especially for her work for the Aboriginal cause. She sums up her ethos this way: “I have, I suppose, been trying to expiate a deep sense of guilt over what we [white settlers] have done to the country, to its first inhabitants of all kinds, and are still and increasingly doing.”
Wright, Judith (Contemporary Literary Criticism): Introduction

Wright, Judith 1915–

An Australian poet of international stature, Wright is also a biographer, critic, and short story writer. Her traditional lyric poetry reflects her Australian heritage and is most noted for its excellent descriptive imagery. (See also Contemporary Authors, Vols. 13-16, rev. ed.)

Wright, Judith (Contemporary Literary Criticism): Val Vallis

Judith Wright's collection of talks given "because she was invited" has as its first concern poetry in general. [Because I Was Invited] also presents a further group of poets treated in the manner of her previous book Preoccupations in Australian Poetry. The great merit of that book lay in her rejection of the usual critical approach, with its emphasis on style and technique at the expense of theme and philosophy….

In the broadest sense the issue of conservation underlies the entire work. Blake's strictures on the evils of "single vision" are central to her argument….

For all the seriousness and the prophetic content of her message these talks are never sermons. She is too good a poet to generalize. Her detail is always concrete, sharp, significant, whether in quotations selected from the poets she discusses, incidents that have occurred in the melancholy grind of teaching her poetry in schools, or facts painstakingly amassed….

[Her first book, The Moving Image,] with its formidable introductory title poem is the work of a practised poet….

[The title poem] was composed after the other poems in the book. It is richer in universal statement than in particulars, many of its key themes and images having been presented in sharper focus in such poems as "Northern River", "Dust", "Country Town", and "The Company of Lovers" (itself a poem veering to the universal rather than, as so often, sending "a shaft trembling in the central gold"—Judith Wright's own image …). Indeed, the most commonly heard objection to her poetry as it progressed was that its author "had gone too philosophical"….

[I would rate Alive, Poems 1971–72 highly], if only for its return to those flashing images drawn from ordinary domesticity that reverberate in the reader's mind…. And who in English since Hardy or Mew (except Judith Wright herself elsewhere) has written a love elegy as inevitable as "Lake in Spring" in that volume? The slimness of this book belies its value: the work is a careful distillation of years of criticism and love.


Wright, Judith (Contemporary Literary Criticism): Peter Porter

Judith Wright is a poet of resonant plainness. Much too plain in the past, for my taste—but her two recent books [Alive and Fourth Quarter] suggest that she is verging on new shores of amazement. This is partly
horror at the efficiency with which her fellow-countrymen are raping their country and partly the intensity of growing old. Hymning a good wooden house and its familiar and loved objects, she asks, "Who'd live in steel and plastic/corseting their lives/with things not decently mortal?" The decency of mortality is a theme she exploits with great richness.

English readers could gain insight into the ambiguous nature of Australia by reading Miss Wright's poems. All Australian poetry tends towards the condition of nature poetry, and her unemphatic accounts of the innocent terrain and its contending overlords are excellent guides to the continent. From insects, creatures and simple rituals, she builds up a case for an Arcadian future. Alas, she knows there is scant hope of its coming to pass. But she also knows that the struggle is older than White Australia. (p. 33)


Wright, Judith (Contemporary Literary Criticism): Margaret Gibson

Selected from work over a span of 30 years, Wright's poems [in The Double Tree: Selected Poems, 1942–1976] bear witness to her commitment to "poetry's ancient vow to celebrate lovelong/life's wholeness." She is Australian, and her bond to her native land and its once pastoral wilderness is evident, expressed in lyric poems of skilled prosody. In her later work, the vow to celebrate radiance is harder to keep. As she sees the destruction to wildlife, water, and land, she is more convinced of human destructiveness, aware of the murderous heart as well as the passionate heart. She looks at opposites, seeking unity and form as "the compass heart swings seeking home/between the lands of life and death." Throughout we follow this poet's pilgrimage, respectful of her loving bonds to family, duty, passion, growth, and art. (pp. 1273-74)


Wright, Judith (Poetry Criticism): Introduction

Judith Wright 1915–

Australian poet, essayist, historical novelist, and critic.

One of Australia's most celebrated female poets, Wright has garnered critical acclaim for concise, traditional verse in which she demonstrates an intellectual awareness of European and American literary traditions and vividly evokes the landscapes and lifestyles of Australia. Although some critics fault her later poems for lyrical abstraction, vague mysticism, and opinionated political observations, Wright has been widely praised for her treatment of such themes as humanity's tenuous perception of time and reality, the struggle of the poet to attain permanence and security, and the need to overcome transience through love. For Wright, poetry "is a means of regaining faith in man" as well as "a way of finding a difficult balance" between internal and external reality.

Biographical Information

Critics often attribute Wright's interest in Australian landscape to her childhood at "Wallamumbi," her family's sheep ranch in New South Wales. After spending her early years there, she left home at age thirteen,
when she was sent to boarding school. From there she went on to study at the University of Sydney and later traveled through Europe with friends. Upon her return to Australia, she worked at various jobs before returning to Wallamumbi to help her father run the station during World War II. It was then that Wright reconnected with the land of her childhood, and found the poetic voice that informs much of her verse. While working as a clerk at the University of Queensland in Brisbane in the 1940s, Wright began to publish her poems in such literary magazines as Meanjin and Southerly. Many of these works were included in her first published collection The Moving Image in 1946. Wright married Jack McKinney, a philosophy writer, and the couple raised one child, Meredith. The poems about love and childbirth in Wright's book Woman to Man were drawn directly from her own experience, and her personal and public life have remained an important part of her poetry. She has been active in promoting the rights of Australia's Aborigines and conservation of the environment and has used these issues as topics for her verse. She also wrote children's stories and poems during her daughter's childhood, then stopped when Meredith was grown. Following her husband's death in 1966, Wright expanded her political involvement and became active in debates over the teaching and uses of poetry, in addition to environmental and social issues. After living in the state of Queensland for many years, she now resides in New South Wales, Australia, near Braidwood.

**Major Works**

In her first collection of verse, The Moving Image, Wright uses lucid, graceful lyrics to evoke a mythic dimension in her subjects. In the process, she conveys a vivid sense of the landscape and history of the New England region of Australia. Her second volume, Woman to Man, is a celebration of womanhood, offering insights into such topics as conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. Often regarded as Wright's most profound work, critics have found Woman to Man notable for its striking imagery and focus on love and chaos. Wright's next two collections moved away from personal and anecdotal material toward more metaphysical and universal subject matter. The Gateway shows the influence of William Blake and T. S. Eliot in its consideration of love, creation, and eternity. The title poem of The Two Fires explores two opposing infernos—one that metaphorically represents the love from which humanity originated and one that is the man-made atomic fire that might extinguish love. Amidst such solemn works, Wright also produced Birds in 1963, a collection of poems that comments on the characteristics of Australia's winged wildlife. She returned to metaphysical issues in many of her poems written in the mid-1960s, with The Other Half addressing the mystic relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind. Of a more worldly nature are the new works in Collected Poems, 1942–1970, several of which attempt to reconcile Wright's private and public roles as a poet. Likewise, Alive: Poems, 1971–1972 also deals with temporal matters as Wright contrasts the natural beauty of her Queensland home with urban ruin, using this comparison to comment on the destruction of the Australian wilderness. In the 1977 collection Fourth Quarter and Other Poems, Wright interweaves childhood reminiscences with observations on old age, but also addresses contemporary political and sociological issues. The book also demonstrates Wright's abilities as a free verse poet, and employs a more relaxed tone than some of her other works. After a lengthy break from publishing poetry collections, Wright's Phantom Dwelling appeared in 1985. In this volume, she brings new light to bear on the themes that dominate so much of her poetry, particularly man's relationship with nature and death. The book also demonstrates Wright's continuing experimentation with a more relaxed, often ironic, poetic style.

**Critical Reception**

With few exceptions, critical response to Judith Wright's first two collections of poetry has been overwhelmingly positive. Employing a traditional lyric style, Wright was lauded for her fresh treatment of the subject matter in both volumes. Appraising The Moving Image, Vincent Buckley argued that "Judith Wright surpasses all other Australian poets in the extent to which she … reveals the contours of Australia as a place, an atmosphere, a separate being." Similar praise was echoed by other critics as The Moving Image established...
Wright as one of Australia’s major poets. Her second volume, *Woman to Man*, was credited with giving a uniquely female perspective to poems dealing with love, creation, and the universe. Elizabeth Vassilief contended that in this collection Wright exhibits the "the ability to re-create the meanings of common words with every new usage; to refresh, deepen and invigorate the language…. And in this power I think she has no equal among Australian poets." The collections published since *Woman to Man* have split critics into two general camps. Many contend that her increasingly metaphysical focus, coupled with forays into rather literal protest poetry, diluted her ability to distill universal and poetic images from common events. Her departure from the more traditional style of her early verse has also been scorned by some observers. Others, however, have characterized her excursions into politics and mysticism, and her stylistic experiments with free verse, as the explorations of a serious poet, who, not content to rest on her laurels, continues to redefine herself and her subject matter as she matures.

**Wright, Judith (Poetry Criticism): Principal Works**

**Poetry**

*The Moving Image* 1946

*Woman to Man* 1949

*The Gateway* 1953

*The Two Fires* 1955

*Birds* 1962

*Five Senses: Selected Poems* 1963; revised edition 1972

*Judith Wright* (selected poems) 1963

*City Sunrise* 1964

*The Other Half* 1966


*Fourth Quarter, and Other Poems* 1976

*The Double Tree: Selected Poems 1942–76* 1978

*Phantom Dwelling* 1985

**Other Major Works**

*King of Dingoes* (juvenilia) 1958

*The Generations of Men* (fictional biography) 1959
The Day the Mountains Played (juvenilia) 1960

Range the Mountains High (juvenilia) 1962; revised edition 1971

Charles Harpur (biography and criticism) 1963; revised edition 1977

Country Towns (juvenilia) 1963

Preoccupations in Australian Poetry (criticism) 1965

The Nature of Love (short stories) 1966

The River and the Road (juvenilia) 1966; revised edition 1971

Henry Lawson (criticism) 1967

Because I Was Invited (essays) 1975

The Coral Battleground (nonfiction) 1977

The Cry for the Dead (fictional biography) 1981

We Call for a Treaty (nonfiction) 1985

**Criticism: Philip Lindsay (essay date 1950)**


[In this essay concerning Wright's Woman to Man, Lindsay asserts that Wright is the first woman poet to speak of love with a truly female voice.]

Of Judith Wright's poetry it might well be said that she is the only woman who has kissed and told. Other women have sung of love, but apart from Sappho—and she, after all, was a man in female skin—none have written honestly and without shame of their desires. Usually we find that women poets were sexually inexperienced ladies, transmuting their desires into religious or metaphysical ecstasies, as with Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti, or, like Emily Dickenson, they have had to invent a lover on whom they could pour the passion of their starved hearts. The last thing I wish is to start a discussion on this question, and, of course, exceptions can be found, but it remains broadly true that sexual repression has commonly been the inspiration of women's art. When I was an art-student, I was surprised to notice how many girls showing genuine promise abandoned their work once they were married. It was as though a hitherto unsatisfied yearning had found completion and the substitute of painting was no longer needed. This is often true also of poetry. Elizabeth Barrett certainly continued to write after her marriage but she might as well never have married for all the revelation it brought into her work and she never unveiled the secrets of her womanly delight in love, save abstractly.

This, Judith Wright has done for us, the Sphinx answering the cry of man down the ages: "What is love to you?" when he holds his beloved in his arms. To explain what I mean, it were best that I quote the title poem of her latest collection, "Woman to Man":

"Woman to Man"
The eyeless labourer in the night,
the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,
builds for its resurrection day—
silent and swift and deep from sight
foresees the unimagined light.

This is no child with a child's face;
this has no name to name it by:
yet you and I have known it well.
This is our hunter and our chase,
the third who lay in our embrace.

This is the strength that your arm knows,
the arc of flesh that is my breast
the precise crystals of our eyes.
This is the blood's wild tree that grows
the intricate and folded rose.

This is the maker and the made;
this is the question and reply;
the blind head butting at the dark,
the blaze of light along the blade.
Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

By stressing this vital aspect of Miss Wright's poetry, I am liable to throw into darkness her other great
qualities and the subtle beauty of her vision which sees with pity yet delight the colours of the world and its
sounds and its unhappy people. There is haunting music in many of her lines which remain to sing in one's
memory:

While past the camp fire's crimson ring
the star-struck darkness cupped him round,
and centuries of cattlebells
rang with their sweet uneasy sound.

Always her vision is a woman's vision whether she wonders on the miracle of a conch-shell or on the need for
pain "that knifes us in blind alleys," on children or trees, on gardens, flowers or lonely spinsters lacking love,
on the half-mad bullochy with his camp-fire in the bush, on the sick soldier Man-jack home from the war, on
the dead snake and the ants that "drink at his hollow eye," on countrydances and the terrifying bush-fire, on
the trapped dingo or the surfer or the half-caste girl, or whether she merrily laughs with a "Song in a
Wine-Bar"?

Toss up your spinning silver,
wild boy, my sailor.
We'll dance till Time is done
who are hot with Time's fever.
Among the tilting buildings
gay boy, wild lover,
we will go on dancing
till our dancing day is over.

Toss up your shining money,
wild boy, my sailor,  
like a Saturday fountain,  
like a holiday river.

Fill the lit street full  
of wine as hot as a lover;  
and we will go on dancing  
till Saturday night is over.

Such light-hearted gaiety is, however, rare in Miss Wright's work. Her feelings are too profound for such drunken moods to last, and continually she returns to contemplate that wonderful sensuous world of her own heart and to glory in her body that can contain her child. But as with all true lovers, her love embraces the world and rejects disgust. Even the sight of the "Metho Drinker" stirs in her, not horror or even pity; she who is rich with love must see even this castaway as a lover:

Under the death of winter's leave she lies  
who cried to Nothing and the terrible night  
to be his home and bread. "O take from me  
the weight and waterfall of ceaseless Time  
that batters down my weakness; the knives of light  
whose thrust I cannot turn; the cruelty  
of human eyes that dare not touch nor pity."  
Under the worn leaves of the winter city  
safe in the house of Nothing now he lies.

His white and burning girl, his woman of fire,  
creeps to his heart and sets a candle there  
to melt away the flesh that hides the bone,  
to eat the nerve that tethers him in Time.  
He will lie warm until the bone is bare  
and on a dead dark moon he wakes alone.  
It was for Death he took her; death is but this  
and yet he is uneasy under her kiss  
and winces from that acid of her desire.

Here, as in all her poems, no matter what the subject, one senses her intense femininity. Impossible, one feels, would it be for any man to have written this. Take her portrait of "The Bull":

In the olive darkness of the sally-trees  
silently moved the air from night to day.  
The summer-grass was thick with honey-daisies  
where he, a curled god, a red Jupiter,  
heavy with power among his women lay.  
But summer's bubble-sound of sweet creek-water  
dwindles and is silent; the seeding grasses  
grow harsh, and wind and frost in the black sallies  
roughens the sleek-haired slopes. Seek him out, then,  
the angry god betrayed, whose godhead passes,  
and down the hillsides drive him from his mob.  
What enemy steals his strength—what rival steals
his mastered cows? His thunders powerless,
the red storm of his body shrunk with fear,
runs the great bull, the dogs upon his heels.

I have quoted largely, for quotations are essential if you would appreciate my claim for Miss Wright as being the first woman honestly to unbare her lover's heart in verse; and I wish I could quote poem after poem. Wherever I dip into her books, lines demand my repeating them; but I dare not continue lest I overspill my space. At her best—and it is far from often that she falls below the high standard she has set herself—her poetry has in it fire and joy and, sometimes, terror. Also—and in this she is unique—she offers the open cup of love to any of us unafraid to look into the naked heart that is both the possessed and the possessing, that is both courageous and timid, both demanding and submissive, of a woman above the cowardly evasions of so many of her sex, one honest and proud of her strong womanhood that can excite and satisfy love. Humbly, I offer thanks and salute her courage.

**Criticism: R. F. Brissenden (essay date 1953)**


[Here, Brissenden examines Wright's first three volumes of poetry. The critic praises many aspects of the poet's work, but worries that the metaphysical panderings in the third volume, The Gateway, denote a shift in Wright's focus, "away from the personal, the particular and the dramatic towards the abstract and the impersonal."

When Judith Wright's first book, *The Moving Image*, appeared it was greeted by the critics with enthusiasm, one writer going so far as to declare that its publication was 'the most important poetic event of 1946'. Another claimed that 'no book of poems has received such an enthusiastic reception here since O'Dowd's *The Bush*.' Since then she has brought out two more collections of verse: *Woman to Man* and *The Gateway*. The growth of her reputation has kept pace with her output of poetry: it would be quite safe to say that she is now widely regarded as one of our leading poets; and there are some who would even support Mr. H. M. Green in placing her 'among the principal poets writing in English today' [Modern Australian Poetry, 1952].

There can be no doubt that her work stands well out from the great mass of Australian poetry—indeed from much of the poetry which fills the pages of literary journals in England and America. Two things in particular lift her poems above the common ruck: their consistently careful and polished technique, and the demand which they make to be considered not just as single poems but as members of a unified body of work.

Judith Wright is first of all a craftsman. She is at her best in her shorter poems, and in the finest of these her mastery of form is always sure and unobtrusive: images and ideas that are often complex are brought together into a controlled and lucid unity in which everything contributes to the central theme; there is nothing superfluous, nothing wanting; the surface texture has that clarity and simplicity which can result only from a mature discipline; and the whole poem has that radiance which comes when each image shines not only with its own light, but also with the light shed on it by every other image in the poem.

This is true also of her work as a whole. The impression which any individual poem makes is deepened and intensified if one has a knowledge of the rest of her poetry; certain themes appear again and again in her poems, and there are certain human problems with which she seems to be constantly pre-occupied. These themes and problems are, moreover, related to one another—the comprehension of one helps to illuminate all the rest. It becomes obvious, once one is familiar with the main body of her work, that Judith Wright is a poetic thinker, someone with a coherent view of life, a view of life which is not only stated but also initially conceived in poetic terms. The problems with which she is concerned are seen through the eyes of a poet;
even more significantly, poetry itself is seen to be an important part of their solution.

There is nothing unique about the problems with which she is most deeply concerned—they are those which have engaged the minds of most serious writers for the past fifty years or so: the problems of discovering, in an age of cultural disintegration and confusion, some significant pattern or purpose in life; the problems of merely existing which are presented by an age in which for so many people, as William Faulkner has remarked [in The Stockholm Address], 'There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: when will I be blown up?'

It has become something of a cliché to say that we live in an age of transition—a label which could be attached to almost any historical period. There are times however in which an unusually large number of things are all changing at the same time, and in which the process of change itself is not only extended but also vastly accelerated. Such is the character of our own age. Social institutions, moral values, the pictures which people have of man in relation to the universe and to other men—things in which the rate of change can usually be measured in terms of generations or even centuries—are today altering within the span of a single life-time. And the literature and philosophy of our age are haunted by the themes of time and change: it is no mere accident of titling which links together such seemingly unrelated works as The Time Machine, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, The Lost Childhood, Space, Time and Deity, Essay on Memory, Five Bells and The Moving Image. 'The cancer of time,' says Henry Miller, 'is eating us away.' No other civilization has ever been so obsessed with time as our own.

The 'moving image' of Judith Wright's first book is Time—Time conceived in an absolute sense as the very process of change itself, the flux of things, which carries us inexorably forward into the future; the shifting and impermanent world through which, according to Plato, we glimpse dimly those truths which are eternal and unchanging. Looked at in this way, Time becomes the enemy which brings us, as individuals, out of the paradise of childhood into the world of maturity in which 'the clock begins to race,' and

We are caught in the endless circle of time and star that never chime with the blood.

It becomes history, the rising tide of events which has brought us to our present crisis in which

Promise and legend fail us and lose power.
Words are rubbed smooth and faceless as old coins
and any story is only word upon word.
Each of us, solitary on his tower,
speaks and dares not listen to what he has said
for fear it lose all meaning as it is heard.

Judith Wright is not alone, even among Australian poets, in her pre-occupation with time. Time is both the theme and the inspiration of 'Five Bells' and 'Essay on Memory'; and Slessor and FitzGerald are as keenly aware as she of the tragic inevitability of change and death. In Judith Wright's poetry, however, the consciousness of time is accompanied by a feeling for history and tradition which is something new in Australian poetry. Slessor and FitzGerald tend to raise their voices, to pose with a somewhat self-consciously romantic air when they present us with their Captain Cooks or their bony hands of memory—these, after all, are History with a capital H.

The past is obviously just as fertile a source of inspiration to Judith Wright as it is to these poets—New England, where her family has lived for more than one generation, lies in the background of much of her poetry: 'part of my blood's country' she calls it in 'South of My Days'.
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

But it is a background and a past which are perfectly assimilated: as a result her poetry is free alike from the
bitter nostalgia of Hope and McAuley; from the strident nationalism which still lingers (in an inverted form)
in the romanticism of Slessor, FitzGerald and D. Stewart; and from the pseudo-mysticism of the
Jindyworobaks. (She has, by the way, inscribed the epitaph of this last group in a small poem called 'Bora
Ring'.

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.)

This balanced, easy and completely unaffected acceptance of Australia—both the land and its people—has,
perhaps, its own defects; but it seems to me to be one of the most important of Judith Wright's qualities as a
poet. No matter what criticism may be levelled at her, she can never (save for an odd phrase or two) be called
immature or provincial. She is neither 'ashamed' of being an Australian, nor irrationally proud of the fact: she
merely accepts the Australian landscape and the Australian people as inevitable and natural features of the
milieu in which she lives and writes.

That she should be able to do this is a mark not only of her own maturity but also of the maturity of Australian
poetry in general. She is not the only modern Australian whose work reveals this unselfconscious acceptance
of Australia; but she is, I believe, the first in whose poetry it has been present from the very beginning. In
years to come Judith Wright will almost certainly be regarded as the typical poet of the 'forties: the decade in
which Australian poetry came of age and learned to forget that it was adolescent and antipodean.

Together with this awareness of history and tradition there is apparent in her work what I can only describe as
a sense of society: a sense at once of the fundamental community of common humanity to which we all
belong, and of the artificial barriers of race, religion and politics which grow up within this community, and
which blind our eyes to its existence. The concluding lines from 'Nigger's Leap: New England,' illustrate very
clearly her awareness of the inevitability of history and her feeling for the ways in which men are linked
together and divided against each other. She is speaking of the aborigines:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last. We should have known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.
And there lie that were ourselves writ strange.

Never from earth again the coolamon
of thin black children dancing like the shadows
of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh
scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.
Night floods us suddenly as history
that has sunk many islands in its good time.

The touch of the true poet is evident in almost every line of 'Nigger's Leap'. One overlooks the trite flatness of
'writ strange' in admiration of the sure and subtle integration of image and theme, the exact and evocative use
of words: 'lips' and 'cools' for instance function perfectly at every level—in the sensitive precision with which
they suggest the actual approach of evening; in the way which they strike an unobtrusive harmony with the central sea-metaphor of the poem; and most of all in their faint but distinct overtone of imminent menace. 'Lips' suggests not only the sound and movement of the rising tide, but also that 'dark throat' of the sea which has engulfed 'many islands in its good time'.

The sea—Time—Society—the natural processes of birth, decay and death: they are all forces in the face of which the individual can be lonely and powerless; and Miss Wright produces her best work when she presents such a situation—when she suggests through a dramatic, particular incident the general feelings and ideas which the contemplation of woman, man and time has aroused in her. 'Nigger's Leap' has for its subject two dramatic incidents—the suicide of the aboriginal, years ago, and the approach of dusk on this particular night—that 'fall of evening (which) is the rebirth of knowing'. 'The Company of Lovers', a relatively simple poem, gains its power not only from the honesty with which its theme is presented, but also from its note of urgent immediacy. And it is on a similar note that she concludes 'Woman to Man'—a poem so fine that it deserves to be quoted in full.

The eyeless labourer in the night,  
the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,  
builds for its resurrection day—  
silent and swift and deep from sight  
foresees the unimagined light.

This is no child with a child's face;  
this has no name to name it by:  
yet you and I have known it well.  
This is our hunter and our chase,  
the third who lay in our embrace.

This is the strength that your arm knows,  
the arc of flesh that is my breast,  
the precise crystals of our eyes.  
This is the blood's wild tree that grows  
the intricate and folded rose.

This is the maker and the made;  
this is the question and reply;  
the blind head butting at the dark,  
the blaze of light along the blade.  
Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

The tone of the first two stanzas is metaphysical: it is brought about by the way in which rather abstract concepts and restrained but deeply felt emotions are blended and fused; and the poem as a whole is notable for the precision with which its paradoxes are stated and the delicate balance in which they are held. Its force and beauty, however, are focused and intensified by the naked simplicity and directness of the last line: the situation is suddenly made dramatic and individual—one woman speaking to one man at a particular time and place.

It is this ability to invest typical human situations with a dramatic significance that gives the best of Miss Wright's poetry its power. In her earlier work this ability often finds its expression in lyrical portraits of individual people—poems such as 'Bullocky', 'The Hawthorn Hedge', 'Brother and Sisters', and others. And even when she ceases to portray individuals and cuts through to that fundamental world in which 'all men are one man', the basic human situation is still often presented dramatically—
Yet where the circle was joined
the desperate chase began;
where love in love dissolved
sprang up the woman and man.
(‘Eden’)

There is nothing static about Judith Wright’s poetry—her world is one of continual movement, change and development. And although she is always conscious of the inevitability of death, she is just as keenly aware of the inevitability of birth: she knows that change does not necessarily involve decay: she sees time not only as a destructive but also as a regenerative force. It is because her vision has this breadth that her work never reflects what is merely a sentimental pessimism. ‘Those who are given to grief know grief only’, she writes in ‘Letter to a Friend’.

It is because of the joy in my heart
that I am your fit mourner.

And the source of much of her inspiration lies in the effort to comprehend in one vision the antinomies of birth and death; growth and decay; love and loneliness; union and isolation. In her best work this effort results in a tension of ideas and an intensity of feeling which remind one of Yeats. The finest poems in Woman to Man and The Gateway have the genuine metaphysical note; and they are, moreover, expressed with a disciplined clarity that is not common enough in modern poetry.

One can never resolve the paradoxes of death-in-life and life-in-death by explaining them away. By a conscious acceptance of them and their mystery, however, the difficulties they present can, in a way, be transcended. But the achievement of a single vision in which these things can be held is no passive thing: the note in much of Miss Wright’s later poetry, is not one of mere acceptance but one of triumph and affirmation:

Darkness where I find my sight,
shadowless and burning night,
here where death and life are met
is the fire of being set.
(‘Midnight’)

And in the poem which gives her latest volume, The Gateway, its title, the affirmation becomes even more explicit.

In the depth of nothing
I met my home.

All ended there;
yet all began.
All sank in dissolution
yet rose renewed.

This note of affirmation sounds most strongly in poems such as ‘Woman to Man’, ‘Woman to Child’ and (from The Gateway) ‘The Promised One’: poems in which the mystical vision of ‘the depth of nothing’ is given weight and substance by some positive human action: a word or gesture of love. It is only through love that the threats and terrors of existence can be overcome: for love is at once unifying and creative. By bringing people together it destroys loneliness, isolation, intolerance and hatred; and through what it creates—peaceful communities as well as children—it defeats death and drives out fear. It is her passionate apprehension of this which gives to the best of Judith Wright’s poetry its individuality and beauty. The love poetry in Woman to...
Man and The Gateway is unique in its combination of intellectual strength with feminine feeling. Only a woman could write poetry like this, and no other woman has done it in quite this way.

Poems such as these can obviously arise only out of deeply felt personal experience; but the strength of these poems probably comes as much from the poet's realization of the necessity of love for the happiness of other people—both as individuals and as members of a society—as it does from her awareness of her own feelings. She is conscious both of the misery of loneliness and of the danger to humanity of the fear and intolerance which loneliness can breed. Love is the solution: and since Judith Wright is a poet, she sees language—the word—as one of the most vital expressions of love, in the intimate, personal sense and in the general, social sense. As she has said in a recent article, it is only through language that the private world of one individual—'the flux of personal and relative experience'—can be made intelligible both to himself and to other individuals. 'Language is … a crystallization of our experience in common; it is the final achievement of men as builders of a picture of their world' ['The Writer and the Crisis' Language, April-May, 1952].

The various themes and problems which, as I have been suggesting, dominate the work of this poet, are not of course always all present in a single poem. But one is never completely unconscious of them: they form a background, a poetic world into which each individual poem can be fitted. And there are some poems which seem to present a focused and concentrated picture of this whole world—in which all its various aspects are gathered together into one pattern. Perhaps the best example of this sort of thing is 'The Bones Speak', with its dominant image of the 'untenanted hollow of this cave' into which 'man with his woman fled from woman and man'.

And the rock fell, and we dissolved in night
and walked the ceaseless maze of emptiness
hollow-socketed, alone, alone;
her once sweet flesh impersonal as stone,
for love is lost in terror, child of sight.

Yet from this universe of vagrancy
always I hear the river underground,
the ceaseless liquid voices of the river
run through these bones that here lie loose together,
a quiver, a whispering, a promise of sound.

The river whose waters move toward the day
the river that wears down our night of stone—
I hear its voice of fall and flood deny
the reign of silence and the realm of bone;
its mining fingers work for this cave's ruin.

The fundamental symbols in this poem—the cave, the bones, the river with 'its voice of fall and flood' which at the same time carries in that voice a 'promise of sound', a hope of rebirth and regeneration—carry the basic and archetypal religious associations which they have borne for generations: but they are brought together into a fresh and individual design, the expected echoes are given a new timbre by our memory of other poems in which love and the word have been set against loneliness and silence.

There is nothing particularly novel in the themes or the images which symbolise them in a poem such as this—if there were it would perhaps not be so effective. But in this, and other poems, Miss Wright's interpretation of these themes is modern, unselfconsciously Australian, and often original.
Despite the individuality of her style, however, one becomes aware after a while of certain literary echoes—faint but inescapable. Mad Tom and Blind Jimmy Delaney are Yeatsian fools from the twenty-eighth phase, and not, I think, particularly successful ones. Mad Tom especially is a rather muddled rhetorician; and in 'The Blind Man', as in Miss Wright's other attempts at a long poem, such as 'The Moving Image' and 'The Flood', the movement of thought and the control of form tend to become hesitant and confused. Once she leaves the confines of the small lyric, or single dramatic statement, a dangerous tendency to philosophise appears—a tendency to talk about ideas and feelings rather than to crystallise them into images. The faint flap of the aged eagle's wings can be heard occasionally too, in the dry air of New England—

I would resolve my mind upon this faith
finding a meaning in annihilation.
Since blood has been your gift, let me accept it,
remembering that for spring's resurrection

some sacrifice was always necessary.
Osiris, Christ; your flesh broken like bread …

And there is obviously a certain similarity between Judith Wright's views on time, man and poetry and those of T. S. Eliot, to whom the purification of the dialect of the tribe is a sacred duty, and who can pronounce the discovery of a new verse form as the most important thing that can happen to a nation. The Four Quartets stand somewhere in the background of even such a fine poem as 'Niggers Leap: New England'; and the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral lies over the deliberately flat and understated imagery of lines like these—

The labourer thinks and spits and looks aside;
the young girls laugh and look frightened;
the fat man with pale eyes passes on the rumour
although he does not believe it.

The echoes are not always so obvious as this; and although it is clear that she has been influenced both by the theory and the practice of Eliot, I do not suggest that either her poetry or the structure of thought behind it is in any important way derivative. Literary influences are after all inevitable and, for those with independent personalities and strong literary digestions, usually beneficial. Superficially at any rate there are few echoes in Judith Wright's later poetry.

The way in which her poetry has developed, however, parallels in a disturbing fashion the pattern of development which can be seen in the poetry of Eliot. The general tone of The Gateway is noticeably different from the tone of the earlier books—especially The Moving Image. One can see that her poetry is moving away from the personal, the particular and the dramatic towards the abstract and the impersonal: a movement sanctioned if not inspired by the example set in the Four Quartets. The poetic aridity which blights certain passages in the Four Quartets is not immediately obvious, however, because of that superb rhythmical control which gives to even the most desiccated of Eliot's utterances the strength and life of vigorous speech. But it is in just this aspect of poetic technique that Miss Wright is at her weakest—the 'free verse' of 'The Flood', 'Letter to a Friend', 'The Gateway', and other of her later poems is slack and nerveless.

Far more obvious than the Eliot influence in The Gateway is the influence—again in a diffuse and fairly wellassimilated way—of Blake. Instead of finding eternity in the acts of woman and man, Miss Wright seems to be seeking it in the grain of sand. Flowers, trees, seeds, birds and insects are beginning to displace men and women as the subjects of her poems; and instead of using the cyclic processes of life which these things exemplify to throw light on the problems and questions of human existence, she does just the opposite. Woman and man seem to be no more significant than the cicadas or the cedar trees: in fact it is not even life but the process of life which seems to be engaging more and more of her attention.
Although there are some fine poems in *The Gateway*, and, as always, the standard of poetic craftsmanship is remarkably high, one misses the depth and passion which make the best poems of *Woman to Man* so outstanding. This slackening of tension, and the emphasis on speculation rather than symbolic statement, are due perhaps to the fact that she has lost some of the philosophical certainty on which her earlier work was based. Judith Wright is after all a remarkably honest poet, and one cannot blame her for trying to work out her difficulties in her poetry. The results however do not seem to me to be always satisfactory. In particular the attempt to create some sort of private mythology, as in poems like 'Legend', 'Nursery Rhyme for a Seventh Son', 'Fairytale'—and some earlier poems—are flat, disappointing, and obviously artificial.

This is not to say that *The Gateway* is an unrewarding book. Occasionally she achieves the authentic simplicity she is seeking—

Lion, let your desert eyes
   turn on me.
Look beyond my flesh and see
   that in it which never dies.

And some of the love poems—'Song', 'All Things Conspire'—take us back to the world of *Woman to Man*. In general, however, the poems in *The Gateway* lack that directness and intensity which distinguish the best of her earlier work. It is interesting in this respect to compare 'Dark Gift', the first poem in *The Gateway*, with 'Woman to Man', the poem which opens the previous collection:

The flower begins in the dark
   where life is not.
Death has a word to speak
   and the flower begins.

   How small, how closely bound
   in nothing's net
the word waits in the ground
   for the cloak earth spins.

The root goes down in the night
   and from night's mud
the unmade, the inchoate
   starts to take shape and rise.

The blind, the upward hand
   clenches its bud.
What message does death send
   from the grave where he lies?

   Open, green hand, and give
   the dark gift you hold.
Oh wild mysterious gold!
   Oh act of passionate love!

The same sort of symbolism is being used in 'Dark Gift' as was used in 'Woman to Man', only in this later poem the symbols are themselves the subject of the poem: they are not being used to illuminate a human situation but for their own sake. As a result there is a slight forcing of the emotion: the 'pathetic fallacy',

16
instead of intensifying the feeling in the poem draws attention to itself: the last two lines,

Oh wild mysterious gold!
Oh act of passionate love!

form a neat climax, but it is weakened by the fact that the poet has had to describe the feelings which, in the earlier poem, were implicit. There is no need for any overt statement of the emotion in 'Woman to Man': the poem is self-contained: it suggests its own mystery and passion.

Judith Wright's attempts at creating her own allegory and mythology are not always unsuccessful. Some of them—such as 'The Forest Path' and 'The Lost Man'—though rather highly pitched, do succeed in creating their own atmosphere. 'The Traveller and the Angel' I find particularly interesting. It tells how, in the strength of his youth, the traveller sets out on his journey. At the ford he meets the first of his tasks: the angel with whom he must wrestle to test his strength.

Marvellously and matched like lovers
we fought there by the ford,
till, every truth elicited,
I, unsurpassably weary,

felt with that weariness
darkness increase on my sight,
and felt the angel failing
in his glorious strength.

Altering, dissolving, vanishing,
he slipped through my fingers,
till when I groped for the death-blow,
I groped and could not find him.

But his voice on the air
pierced the depths of my heart.
"I was your strength; our battle leaves you doubly strong.

"Now the way is open
and you must rise and find it—the way to the next ford
where waits the second angel."

But weak with loss and fear
I lie still by the ford.
Now that the angel is gone
I am a man, and weary.

Return, angel, return.
I fear the journey.

Is it too much, I wonder, to see in this poem a parable of the poet's own poetic development? It seems obvious, at least, that Judith Wright herself feels that she has reached the end of one phase of her growth as a poet and thinker—and also that she is not quite certain where she is going next. 'Go easy with me, old man',
she says in one poem; 'I am helping to clear a track to unknown water.' At the risk of appearing unkind, I would suggest that unless she discovers the water she is seeking her work may not develop any further. One can only hope that she finds her new source of inspiration—and that when she does she can translate it into new and more vital poetry. Unless she can do this it seems to me that her work stands in real danger of becoming repetitive and stagnant.

It would be a lasting pity if this were to happen. Even if it should, however, it could not take away from the excellence of what she has already achieved: a body of poetry more coherent and self-consistent than that produced by any contemporary Australian poet; and a few poems which are fit to stand with the best that have appeared in England and America during the last ten or fifteen years.

**Criticism: Robert Ian Scott (essay date 1956)**


[In the following essay, Scott places the philosophical underpinnings of the poet's work within the context of a Platonic worldview, noting her dual views of nature: on one hand it represents the immediate world and worldly concerns, while on the other it symbolizes an unchanging cosmos that is sensed unconsciously and idealized as Eden.]

Most of the 155 poems in Judith Wright's four books make manifest love and birth and death, which are abstract ideas having in themselves no single form, in terms of such concrete particulars as lovers, old people, little children and Australian landscapes. These subjects, love and birth and death, are shown as all inter-related and aspects of time, and as provoking questions we continue to ask, but never finally answer, about what and why we and life and time are.

Our philosophies are formed in part by what we read, and the epigraphs of Judith Wright's books suggest what world-view her poems present. The epigraph of her first book, *The Moving Image* (1946), is from Plato's cosmography, the *Timaeus*: "Time is a moving image of eternity". Plato based his philosophy on, among other things, the ideas of three earlier Greek thinkers, Pythagoras, Herakleitos and Parmenides. Pythagoras (or his followers) held that our souls and consciousnesses are identical, are immortal, and pass through many cycles of birth and death in different bodies until they gain their goal, some unchanging eden, out of time, and for which all life and time and this earth itself are but a drab prelude. Such poems as "The Bones Speak" and "Fire at Murdering Hut" are Pythagorean in that Judith Wright speaks in them in terms of other consciousnesses than her own, showing us what bones and fire presumably might feel in order to show us what bones and fire (and we) are. In such poems as "Woman to Man", "The Cedars", "Transformations" and "Landscapes", she concerns herself with the cyclic transformations which love and birth and death effect within the seasons of our lives and of the years. This is the Herakleitean world in time.

According to Herakleitos, everything changes but change itself. Parmenides claimed that reality does not change; what changes is only illusion. Judith Wright's poems report Herakleitean sense-data, and, in seeking some Parmenidean constancy in it, or cause for it, articulate this sense-data and give it a meaningful coherency. Plato, combining the views of Parmenides, Herakleitos and Pythagoras, wrote that this earth in time is but a changing (and thus an imperfect) replica of an eternal reality. This is a complex world-view, and Judith Wright's poems present various aspects of it.

In her first book, *The Moving Image*, Judith Wright is concerned more with this earth and with time than with eternity—with the moving image we experience directly and not with any reality which we may guess at or posit beyond earthly experience. Accordingly, in the poem "Northern River", she speaks of time as
the sea that encompasses
all sorrow and all delight,
and holds the memories
of every stream and river.

This is to say that all lives end in time and die, and so we must enjoy what present pleasures and what memories we have while we can; and must love, now, even while death begins to trap and end us, as in "The Company of Lovers". Some of these lives—and what, in time, they came to—are the subjects of "Remittance Man", "Bullocky", "Brother and Sisters", "The Hawthorn Hedge", "Bora Ring" and "Soldier's Farm" in this first book, and of many poems in the three later books.

Judith Wright explores memories of her childhood on the granite New England tableland around Armidale, New South Wales (where she was born in 1915), in these poems and in "South of My Days":

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite—
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,
willow-choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crab-apple
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter.

O cold the black-frost night. The walls draw in to the warmth
and the old roof cracks its joints; the slung kettle
hisses a leak on the fire. Hardly to be believed that summer
will turn up again some day in a wave of rambler roses,
thrust its hot face in here to tell another yarn—
a story old Dan can spin into a blanket against the winter.
Seventy years of stories he clutches round his bones.
Seventy summers are hived in him like old honey.

Droving that year, Charleville to the Hunter,
nineteen-one it was, and the drought beginning;
sixty head left at the McIntyre, the mud round them
hardened like iron; and the yellow boy died
in the sulky ahead with the gear, but the horse went on,
stopped at the Sandy Camp and waited in the evening.
It was the flies we seen first, swarming like bees.
Came to the Hunter, three hundred head of a thousand—
cruel to keep them alive—and the river was dust.
Or mustering up in the Bogongs in the autumn
when the blizzards came early. Brought them down;
we brought them down, what aren't there yet.

Or driving for Cobb's on the run up from Tamworth—
Thunderbolt at the top of Hungry Hill,
and I gave him a wink. I wouldn't wait long, Fred,
not if I was you; the troopers are just behind,
coming for that job at the Hillgrove. He went like a luny,
him on his big black horse. Oh, they slide and they vanish

19
as he shuffles the years like a pack of conjuror's cards.
True or not, it's all the same; and the frost on the roof
cracks like a whip, and the back-log breaks into ash.
Wake, old man. This is winter, and the yarns are over.
No one is listening. South of my days' circle
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

Such poems as these and "Nigger's Leap: New England" and "For New England" attempt, as Wordsworth put it, in his preface to the second edition of his Lyrical Ballads,

to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them,
throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and at the
same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things
should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further, and above all, to make
these incidents and situations interesting, by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously,
the primary laws of our nature …

This is to explore both a mental and a geographical environment. What is shown to us, both in these shorter poems and in the longer title-poem in the first book, is what is seen and has been seen, within the limits set by one life, in one locality. Here the poet attempts simply to see and to show us what does exist within these limits—the "high lean country" and the "old stories that still go walking in my sleep"—rather than to suggest that some eternal reality, some cause imagined to exist beyond these limits, causes and explains everything, us included.

In the poem "Waiting", in The Moving Image, what ails us is that we are caught in earth and time, rather than in some eden to shelter us from the effects of time and earth: death, pain and disillusionment. Eden is linked with love more frequently and more explicitly in the second book, Woman to Man (1949), the epigraph of which is

Love was the most ancient of all the gods, and existed before everything else, except Chaos, which is held coeval therewith…. The summary or collective law of nature, or the principle of love, impressed by God upon the original particles of all things, so as to make them attack each other and come together, by the repetition and multiplication whereof all variety in the universe is produced, can scarcely find full admittance in the thoughts of man, though some faint notion may be had thereof. [Francis Bacon, The Wisdom of the Ancients]

This has a Lucretian ring, but there is, in this second book, little of Lucretius' scepticism of bitterness. Love is shown as creating life and as giving to an otherwise chaotic world some meaning and coherence, as in, for instance, "Woman to Child":

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me;
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

There moved the multitudinous stars,
and coloured birds and fishes moved.
There swam the sliding continents.
All time lay rolled in me, and sense,
and love that knew not its beloved.

O node and focus of the world;
I hold you deep within that well
you shall escape and not escape—
that mirrors still your sleeping shape;
that nurtures still your crescent cell.
I wither and you break from me;
yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.

Yet love may be mistaken, and end us, as in "Metho Drinker":

Under the death of winter's leaves he lies
who cried to Nothing and the terrible night
to be his home and bread. "O take from me
the weight and waterfall of ceaseless Time
that batters down my weakness; the knives of light
whose thrust I cannot turn; the cruelty
of human eyes that dare not touch nor pity."
Under the worn leaves of the winter city
safe in the house of Nothing now he lies.
His white and burning girl, his woman of fire,
creeps to his heart and sets a candle there
to melt away the flesh that hides the bone,
to eat the nerve that tethers him in Time.
He will lie warm until the bone is bare
and on a dead dark moon he wakes alone.
It was for Death he took her; death is but this
and yet he is uneasy under her kiss
and winces from that acid of her desire.

There is a duality, apparently, in all things, or in the way we see them. We desire life, consciousness, at times,
and sleep or death or forgetfulness at other times, and may think eden or alcohol the only way we can resolve
our conflicting desires. Or we may be sadly sure that there are no edens, or none that we can reach, while alive
or after death. But it is eden, as cause of this earth and time, and our refuge, the result and goal of love, that is
the coherency sought in the third book, The Gateway (1953), as its epigraph indicates:

Thou perceivest the Flowers put forth their precious Odours;
And none can tell from how small a centre comes such sweet,
Forgetting that within that centre Eternity expands
Its ever-during doors …
[William Blake, Milton]

Love is less earthly here, and is our way to this central eden. In the poem "Eden", Judith Wright argues that it
is only there, out of time, that we can reconcile our warring desires and make whole our divided souls. In "The
Orange Tree", eden is that "single perfect world of gold / no storm can undo nor death deny", where we will
not feel what she calls the "pangs of life". In "Botanical Gardens", we must endure our earthly lives while
dreams of eden torment us. All these things are true enough emotionally to move us, and yet may cloy, may
raise more doubts than they settle: time and pain and this earth are all real things, felt now, by us, here, and eden is, for us here, only a word, a dream, and nothing more.

In her poem "Unknown Water", Judith Wright would apparently agree, when she says that truth is a kind of life, or an answer made more by actions than by words to those questions life thrusts at us. Words fail; reasons fail; whatever we believe is tested against our senses, against the Herakleitean flux of our earthly experience in time (which seems to change all things), as perhaps she recognizes in her choice of an epigraph for her fourth book, *The Two Fires* (1955):

This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures of its kindling, and measures going out. [Herakleitos, fragment 20, *Early Greek Philosophy*]

And this nominalist view is expressed in "Gum-Trees Stripping" in the fourth book:

Say the need's born within the tree,
and waits a trigger set for light;
say sap is tidal like the sea,
and rises with the solstice-heat—
but wisdom shells the words away
to watch this fountain slowed in air
where sun joins earth—to watch the place
at which these silent rituals are.

Words are not meanings for a tree.
So it is truer not to say,
"These rags look like humility,
or this year's wreck of last year's love,
or wounds ripped by the summer's claw."
If it is possible to be wise
here, wisdom lies outside the word
in the earlier answer of the eyes.

Wisdom can see the red, the rose,
the stained and sculptured curve of grey,
the charcoal scars of fire, and see
around that living tower of tree
the hermit tatters of old bark
split down and strip to end the season;
and can be quiet and not look
for reasons past the edge of reason.

These two quite different views—one, to ignore this world, to seek some eden, and the other, to take this changing earth as our only reality, if no refuge—these two views expressed in these poems reflect the essential duality of any Platonic world-view. Philosophers generally try to explain all eventualities by, and to resolve them within, some single self-coherent plan, and so Plato tried to combine within his one world-view both Herakleitean concrete particulars (such as gum-trees) and some central abstract Parmenidean reality as cause and explanation of everything. Poets generally try to articulate not whole world-orders, but, instead, to crystallize moments of emotional perception, and to make them clear and significant to every man. Judith Wright expresses her concern with saying precisely what it is she senses, and for relating that sense-data to some central general meaning, in her poem "For Precision", in which she says she wants to
She writes almost as if any intense, exact perception is a way towards the centre, explaining all things, is an act of love, and a way to stop or to put off time. Her poems attempt to articulate such perception, and in doing so to present some part of the complex Platonic world-view. In this fourth book, the poems "Storm", "Gum-Trees Stripping" and "West Wind" concern the Herakleitean flux of earthly things, and "Landscapes" and "Wildflower Plain" note how cyclic death brings on rebirth. This is one halfworld, and she asks after the other in such poems as "Silence" and "Song" in _The Two Fires_:

O where does the dancer dance—
the invisible centre spin—
whose bright periphery holds
the world we wander in?

For it is he we seek—
the source and death of desire;
we blind as blundering moths
around that heart of fire.

Caught between birth and death
we stand alone in the dark
to watch the blazing wheel
on which the earth is a spark,

crying, Where does the dancer dance—
the terrible centre spin,
whose flower will open at last
to let the wanderer in?

Judith Wright attempts to express each half-world in terms of the other. She states the duality of her Platonic worldview in such phrases as

Not till life halved, and parted
one from the other,
did time begin, and knowledge

(from "In Praise of Marriages") and as (in "Return")

... unity becomes duality,
and action scars perfection like a pin.

The mind in contemplation sought its peace—
that round and calm horizon's purity—
which, known one instant, must subsist always.
But life breaks in again, time does not cease;
that calm lies quiet under storms of days.

These poems attempt to catch, to crystallize, what we feel and what we see, and to say why, and what it means. Where her poems fail, it is generally either because the end-emotion in them is only stated, and not a result of the poem, or because what is shown to us is not at once concrete or lastingly meaningful. Then, the direct statement fails to convince, the metaphor falls apart or is not formed, and neither metaphor nor statement is related to what we feel and sense and know, and so they do not involve us emotionally.
Judith Wright has moved from exploring her childhood environment and memories to attempts to articulate and explain her world in terms of love and of eden. This is to present, first, what she has known of Herakleitean earth and time, and then to seek the Parmenidean explanation, the eternal reality, of which earth and time are but moving images. These are the two halves of the one world-view her poems present, all of which was always implicit in the epigraph of the first book. This world-view may not be entirely convincing, and there are no final answers in it, or in any other world-view, but Judith Wright has put some statements most cogently and coherently where we can expect no answers but life and death themselves.

**Criticism: William Fleming (essay date 1958)**


*In the following essay, Fleming takes issue with the generally warm response Australian critics have given Wright's poetry. He methodically attacks both the "content" and the "form" of Wright's works, and decries what he terms her "paucity of imagination."*

Some verse is made to be sung, some intoned, some declaimed, some spoken—and some mumbled. Judith Wright's belongs to the last category. Compare this

Fra bank to bank, fra wood to wood I rin,
Ourhailit with my feeble fantasie
Lik til a leaf that fallis from a tree
Or til a reed ourblowin with the wind
*Mark Alexander Boyd (1563–1601), Sonet*

with this

Sanctuary, the sign said. Sanctuary—
trees, not houses; flat skins pinned to the road
of possum and native cat; and here the old tree stood
for how many thousand years? that old gnome—tree
some axe-new boy cut down. Sanctuary, it sad:
but only the road has meaning here. It leads
into the world's cities like a long fuse laid.
*Judith Wright, "Sanctuary"*

It is necessary to be thus unhandsome at the outset because it has become universal practice for Australian critics to write of Judith Wright's verse no more responsibly than does the writer of the dust-jacket blurb of … *The Two Fires*: "It is safe to predict that many of them [referring to the verses of an earlier book], by their inspired fusion of passion, intellect, and artistry, will live in the literature of the English-speaking world." Similarly, Kenneth Slessor's "Five Bells" has in this continent been described on at least one occasion as superior to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land."

In view of which things it seems advisable in the present examination not to beat about the bush.

The poetry of *The Two Fires* is poetry made of certain classifiable ingredients: of epithets—

Nothing is so bare as truth—
that lean geometry of thought
"The Man Beneath the Tree"

of apostrophes—

Oh, Passionate gazer, oh enraptured hearer,
oh eager climber, perhaps you climb too late.

"Dialogue"

and, especially, of appositions—

—all of which are rhetorical devices for simulating fervor; which is a different thing from poetry.

Quite probably it is this quality of fervor which accounts for the high prestige in Australia of Judith Wright's work. As Yeats remarked, "They don't like poetry; they like something else, but they like to think they like poetry."

Other detracting characteristics of Judith Wright's work, of which critics to date have been equally oblivious, would be abstractionism (notice how characters like Old Gustav, Mr. Ferritt, the Prospector, are generalized before being realized), a didacticism that generally blows up in bathos—

Yet it is time that holds,
somewhere although not now,
the peal of trumpets for us; time that bears,
made fertile even by those tears,
even by this darkness, even by this loss,
incredible redemptions—hours that grow,
as trees grow fruit, in a blind holiness,
the truths unknown, the loves unloved by us.

"The Harp and the King"

and a high frequency of appearance of the off-key adjective (gonfalon of the contemporary band-wagon)—

The solitary mountain is as tall as grief

"Mount Mary"

This is what I can neither bear nor heal
for you—that the fierce various street,
the country tower of tree and bell of bird,
are blown aside a little by the venomous wind
that twitches at the curtain over hell …

"Two Generations"

On the other hand, to be fair, what Judith Wright seems to have her eye on, through these "incidentals," is a registering of sudden "illuminations" (whatever that may mean); as thus:

Hunger and force his beauty made
and turned a bird to a knife-blade.

"Black-shouldered Kite"

Root, limb, and leaf unfold
out of the seed, and these rejoice
till the tree dreams it has a voice
to join four truths in one great world of gold.
"The Wattle-tree"

I suppose it may be possible to compose in this fashion useful poetry even though the verse be inferior (e.g. Keats?), but it is an unsatisfying and unlikely accomplishment. Prosody, after all, is what essentially distinguishes verse from prose; and the prosody of The Two Fires, as manifested in recurrent vocal awkwardnesses such as "like a long fuse laid," "makes all whole," "which, known one instant, must subsist always." "No Mother's Day present planned," is unlovely.

Having isolated a few, but quite damaging, points in the matter of "form," it remains to consider the more tricky matter of "content."

It is first necessary, however, to clarify this distinction—important, in general use, but little understood—of "form" and "content." "Content," to start with the essential matter first, is that part (qualitative part, say aspect) of a poem which is translatable without loss into other words—whether arranged in verse, prose, or a foreign language; as melody may be played without loss on any instrument, or be sung, or whistled: as design may be executed without loss in pencil, in water color, or oil—so "content." It is the basic, first received part of a poem, that on which it is constructed, called inscape by Hopkins, phanopoeia by Pound (understood as the play of images on the imaginative eye), plot by Aristotle—also form (in the technical sense as distinct from its meaning in the looser usage). When this "content," "inscape," "phanopoeia," "form" is slight, as it well may be, there must be considerable melodic or verbal interest to compensate (as in the Elizabethan songs). On the other hand, excellence in plot can cover all manner of defects in technique (e.g. though Villon and Corbiere may have nowhere near the technical resource of Laforgue, say, they are nevertheless the better poets).

Rather than contrasting "content" and "form," then, it is better to contrast "plot" and "technique"—better still to make use of the poet's terminology, "phanopoeia," "melopoeia" and "logopoiea," subdividing "technique" into two. Thus:

phanopoeia:
the conception, the idea, "what it says" together with "the way of putting it";

melopoeia:
the music—sound, rhythm, metre, rhyme;

logopoeia:
the implication—what’s implied by the words and by the words and by the sound, in toto—the relation which all the parts bear to each other and to the whole and to all the other poems, writing, expressions, etc., that may be expected to be known to the cultivated reader whether as tradition or as current clichéd usage.

Let us now apply these distinctions to Judith Wright's work: the "melopoeia" has been shown to be crude; the "logopoeia" she makes use of is the non-sophisticated type, the blurred, non-rational "heavy-going" kind of association which means everything or nothing, not being precise. Now for the "phanopoeia." For convenience let us subdivide this into two parts, (1) "what it says" (the literal side), and (2) "how it puts it" (the imaginative side—previously called Wit).

In regard first to the literal side, "what it says," it may be useful to keep in mind that some writers are interested in the life of the mind (i.e. the advancement and promotion of useful, communicable knowledge), while some are not. The "content" of those who are not, though possibly interesting as a curiosity, must necessarily be considerably less significant than that of those who are. Though deadly serious in most of her poems (as one wanting to have it both ways), Judith Wright does not evidence in her work any noteworthy
such interest. Indeed, it can be categorically asserted, harshly perhaps but necessarily, that her quasi-biological musings along pre-Socratic lines of speculation (One / Many / All / Time) have added nothing to the quantum of human knowledge.

As thus for instance: in "At Cooloolah," as frequently elsewhere, Judith Wright broaches the time-honored theme of the "rootlessness" of European peoples in the Australian aboriginal's land—in such incredibly incompetent lines as

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah
knew that no land is lost or won by wars
for earth is spirit: the invader's feet will tangle
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

I should imagine that a genuinely satisfactory mental accommodation to a strange landscape and climate would consist in distinguishing its features and aspects, and in naming them accordingly. Which process immediately separates one from most of those who dance corroborees: they are the ones whose "blood is thinned by fears." Judith Wright appears to exhort us in much of her work to go back to the mental attitude of people who dance corroborees—that is, to some variety of Animism.

Now Animism in one form or another seems currently to be the "philosophy" most favored in verse, particularly in the official critical circles—possibly because "thought" along such lines does not impinge seriously on matters ethical or political. Hence perhaps another reason for the high standard of Judith Wright's work.... But for the life of me I cannot fathom how people to whom the whole heritage of Western civilization is available as a birthright must go hankering after barbarisms and darkness—on cultural manifestations, at any rate, far less rational and less spiritual than ours (specialists naturally excepted).

In conclusion, I should like to set in juxtaposition for the reader's meditation two disconnected stanzas from Judith Wright's "The Man Beneath the Tree" and two from William Carlos Williams' "The Fool's Song." In this case we are pointing up the paucity of the imaginative side, "how it puts it," of her "content" / "phanopoeia"; but the sound and associative values of the two exhibits may also be profitably compared. The comparison should illustrate how it is no truly kind service to the local product irresponsibly to inflate its importance.

**Criticism: G. A. Wilkes (essay date 1965)**


Here, Wilkes defends Wright's third and fourth volumes of poetry, The Gateway and The Two Fires, contending that the two collections represent an expansion in Wright's poetry, an attempt "to reach beyond the immediate experience, to probe its significance. " Additionally, Wilkes examines the significance of two later collections, Birds and Five Senses, in Wright's body of work.]

The Recognition so quickly won by Judith Wright's early work, in The Moving Image (1946) and Woman to Man (1949), has proved strangely prejudicial to her later verse. The Moving Image was a volume in which sense perceptions were held and explored, the titles of the poems reading like a series of talismans—"Trapped Dingo", "Bulletky", "The Surfer", "Nigger's Leap: New England"— and their impact coming from the sheer individuality of perception:

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

The same immediacy and vitality was felt in the lyrical poetry of her second book, in the set of love poems on
the woman, the man and the unborn child—"the third who lay in our embrace".

The collections that followed, The Gateway (1953) and The Two Fires (1955), were received with less
enthusiasm, if not with positive misgivings at the "increasing impersonality" of Judith Wright's work, its
movement towards the general and the abstract. To the reader who valued The Moving Image and Woman to
Man, The Gateway could well seem like a collection of the poems rejected from those earlier books. Criticism
of the later verse in general has been influenced by an assumption that Judith Wright was still trying to write
the kind of poetry she had written before, but was now failing in the attempt. I should argue, to the contrary,
that in The Gateway and Two Fires she is attempting poetry of another kind.

It had been clear in The Moving Image itself that Judith Wright was not content merely to write poems of
observation, however acute and sensitive: there had been a constant effort to reach beyond the immediate
experience, to probe its significance. This effort was felt in the strained endings of "The Surfer" and
"Bullocky", in the forcing of the Homeric parallel in "Trapped Dingo"; it was felt also in the title-poem in the
attempt at a large philosophical pronouncement on Time, as "a moving image of eternity". Woman to Man,
interpreted in the light of its epigraph, upheld love ("the summary or collective law of nature … imposed by
God upon the original particles of all things") as a counter to the destructiveness of Time, a force of renewal
and regeneration. The tendencies pursued in the later verse are tendencies present from the beginning, but they
confront Judith Wright with dilemmas that compel a departure from her earlier manner.

The surface change—the one repeatedly noted—is that the world as perceived, hitherto the main source of her
poetic inspiration, ceases to dominate her field of vision. Instead it offers now a starting-point for reflection,
as in "Phaius Orchid"; or a symbolic situation to be explored, as in "The Pool and the Star"; or it is translated
from literal reality into a sphere of imagination and dream, as in "Lion". A poem like "The Cycads" in Woman
to Man already indicates the change. The trees are seen as enduring through the centuries, surviving
generation after generation of other forms of life:

Only the antique cycads sullenly
keep the old bargain life has long since broken:
and, cursed by age, through each chill century
they watch the shrunken moon, but never die,

for time forgets the promise he once made,
and change forgets that they are left alone.
Among the complicated birds and flowers
they seem a generation carved in stone

but the cycads are not here "observed" as they would have been in The Moving Image. The reader could not
learn from the poem that cycads are palm-like, or discover much else of their physical appearance as
Macrozamia. The cycads figure only as part of the reverie of the poet, as a symbol of time itself:

Leaning together, down those gulfs they stare
over whose darkness dance the brilliant birds
that cry in air one moment, and are gone;
and with their countless suns the years spin on.
Take their cold seed and set it in the mind,
and its slow root will lengthen deep and deep
till, following, you cling on the last ledge
over the unthinkable, unfathomed edge
beyond which man remembers only sleep.

From *The Gateway* onward, individual poems gain from their relationship to one another, and to the total movement of which they are part. It is significant that the epigraph to *The Gateway* is taken from Blake (while a later poem is addressed to Traherne), and that of the Australian poets whom Judith Wright has studied, she has written most perceptively of John Shaw Neilson. It is not so much that her poetry is losing its grasp on the actual world; it is rather that the instinct she possessed from the outset, to press towards the underlying significance of a given experience, is becoming more searching and insistent. A possible access to Judith Wright's later verse lies through the concept of the "two lives", to which she herself referred in discussing the poetry of Chris Brennan. He gave his own formulation of it in his lectures on symbolism in 1904 [published in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, 1965]:

> There are, as most of us keenly feel, two lives: that lies in the brightness of truth, this stumbles in error; that is radiant with love and beauty, this is vexed with its own littleness and meanness; that is unfettered, lying beyond good and evil, this is caught in the quagmire … Poetry, mediating between the two, necessarily enters into the conflict… its part is both to exasperate and reconcile that war.

Judith Wright's earlier poetry had been established in one world, the finite world available to the senses, and had drawn its strength from the clarity and vitality of her sense perceptions. The effort of the later poetry is to reach beyond that world—an effort that is always arduous and most often frustrated, but that leads Judith Wright into regions unexplored before. In *The Gateway* and *Two Fires* the contingent world has become both an earnest of the ideal world and a denial of it, at times a prison and at times a means of release.

Thematicallly the most instructive of these later poems is "The Gateway" itself, which takes up the conception of the journey developed also in "The Lost Man" and Traveller and the Angel". Through the gateway lies the land where the contingent world falls away and the self is the "sole reality"; the way leads on until the path itself vanishes and the self is dissolved in turn—then from nothingness, it is remade:

> To say that I recall that time, that country, would be a lie; time was not, and I nowhere. Yet two things remain— one was the last surrender, the other the last peace. In the depths of nothing I found my home.

> All ended there, yet all began. All sank in dissolution and rose renewed.

This is the only poem in which the transition from the one world to the other is completed, and then only at the level of descriptive statement. The other poems in *The Gateway* remain fixed in the world of time, where the only renewal offered is a rebirth into the natural cycle, as presented so painfully in "The Cicadas":

---

29
Terrible is the pressure of light into the heart.
The womb is withered and cracked, the birth is begun,
and shuddering and groaning to break that iron grasp
the new is delivered as the old is torn apart …

Spring, bringing new life, is resented in "The Cedars" as confirming the bondage to the processes of time:

Spring, returner, knocker at the iron gates,
why should you return? None wish to live again …

For it is anguish to be reborn and reborn:
at every return of the overmastering season
to shed our lives in pain, to waken into the cold …

The natural world is seen here as a prison, mocking efforts to escape from it. At other times, in its obedience to its own law, it possesses a harmony and Tightness that by contrast prove a torment to the divided self. This is an idea touched on in "The Flame Tree"

How to live, I said, as the flame-tree lives?
To know what the flame-tree knows—to be prodigal of my life as that wild tree
and wear my passion so?

and developed in "Birds":

Whatever the bird does is right for the bird to do—
cruel kestrel dividing in his hunger the sky,
thrush in the trembling dew beginning to sing,
parrot clinging and quarrelling and veiling his queer eye—
all these are as birds are and good for birds to do.
But I am torn and beleaguered by my own people.
The blood that feeds my heart is the blood they gave me,
and my heart is the house where they gather and fight for dominion—
all different, all with a wish and a will to save me,
to turn me into the ways of other people.

At other moments again, the world is seen with the particularity characteristic of The Moving Image, but with the difference that its beauty now symbolises the plight of existence subject to time. For whom does the phaius orchid flower? For the lizards and the ants merely, in a purposeless splendour?

Out of the brackish sand
see the phaius orchid build
her intricate moonlight tower
that rusts away in flower.

For whose eyes—for whose eyes
does this blind being weave
sand's poverty, water's sour,
the white and black of the hour

into the image I hold
and cannot understand?
Is it for the ants, the bees,
the lizard outside his cave,

or is it to garland time—
eternity's cold tool
that severs with its blade
the gift as soon as made?

These later poems betray an increasing consciousness of dualities that refuse to be resolved into singleness—the duality of life in time and life beyond it, of disorder and harmony, of flesh and spirit, of reason and unreason. This motif persists in *The Two Fires* (1955), perhaps giving more identity to the collection than its declared theme, mankind threatened by the atomic bomb. There is a recurring sense of the poet trying to scrutinise her own mental processes ("Flesh"), being baffled in a conscious search for what should come effortlessly ("The Man Beneath the Tree"), or finding in the outside world ("Nameless Flower", "Gum-trees Stripping") modes of existence whose simplicity and completeness humble the ego. Although a poem like "The Man Beneath the Tree" so strongly recalls Shaw Neilson, this is not to suggest that Judith Wright is a mystic—though perhaps she might wish that she were. From the time of *Woman to Man* at least, she has been especially concerned with the role of the poet, the poet as "The Maker"—

All things that glow and move,
all things that change and pass,
I gather their delight
as in a burning-glass;

all things I focus in
the crystal of my sense.
I give them breath and life
and set them free in the dance

and in *The Two Fires* the emphasis falls more strongly on the poet's power to impose coherence on the disorder of the world. In "For Precision", his role is defined in a way that would put an end to the sense of duality haunting Judith Wright's work:

In "forming into one chord / what's separate and distracted", the poet may establish a moment of harmony, transcend—if only for an instant—the world of flux and the sense of the divided self. The enigmatic piece "The Cup" fixes on silence as a state or quality that is likewise isolated from the conflict; "Song" presents the dance as another symbol of transcendence, recalling Yeats.

Yet the poem that concludes *The Two Fires* reproduces most painfully the dilemma that all Judith Wright's later verse has sought to escape. "The Harp and the King" insists on the captivity of human life in time. The old king is frightened and despairing, calling the harp to comfort him as he feels "night and the soul's terror coming on":

The world's a traitor to the self-betrayed;
but once I thought there was a truth in time,
while now my terror is eternity.
So do not take me outside time.
Make me believe in my mortality,
since that is all I have, the old king said.
The harp replies that time offers "aching drought" and resurgent fertility, suffering and failure followed by "incredible redemptions"—and yet is finally comfortless, unless it be transcended:

This is the praise of time, the harp cried out—
that we betray all truths that we possess.
Time strips the soul and leaves it comfortless
and sends it thirsty through a bone-white drought.
Time's subtler treacheries teach us to betray.
What else could drive us on our way?
Wounded we cross the desert's emptiness
and must be false to what would make us whole.
For only change and distance shape for us
some new tremendous symbol for the soul.

While the theoretical scheme of the poem asserts the possibility of transcendence or release, this is eclipsed in the stronger feeling of compulsive bondage to time.

After *The Two Fires* there was an interval of seven years before Judith Wright published another collection. On its appearance, *Birds* (1962) seemed something of an interlude in her career. The delicacy of perception in "Dotterel" and "Parrots" would seem like a return to the mode of *The Moving Image*, except that this is a talent she has had always at command, like the gift for the "character" poem seen from "Remittance Man" to "Old House" to "Bachelor Uncle". At the same time a poem like "Eggs and Nestlings" reveals that the cruel contrast of the "two lives" can make itself felt even here:

The moss-rose and the palings made
a solemn and a waiting shade
where eagerly the mother pressed
a sheltering curve into her nest.

Her tranced eye, her softened stare,
warned me when I saw her there,
and perfect as the grey nest's round,
three fail and powdered eggs I found.

My mother called me there one day.
Beneath the nest the eggshells lay,
and in it throbbed the triple greed
of one incessant angry need.

Those yellow gapes, those starveling cries,
how they disquieted my eyes!—
the shapeless furies come to be
from shape's most pure serenity.

*Birds* was followed in 1963 by *Five Senses*, Judith Wright's choice from all her previously published work, with the addition of the new series "The Forest". The sense of continuing search is stressed in the poem of this title: although over the years the strangeness of the forest has been subdued into the named and known, still

My search is further.
There's still to name and know
beyond the flowers I gather
that one that does not wither—
the truth from which they grow.

Many of the poems assembled in "The Forest" were first published in the 1950's, and this series does not so much advance the search as confer a symmetry on it. There is even a suggestion that it is becoming stylised, as poems like "Interplay", "The Lake", "Double Image" and "Vision" seem to rely on a depersonalised introspection, an oracular manner, and references to love as an absolute. The originality of Judith Wright's talent is not in question, as "For My Daughter" is enough to show, or a more recent poem like "Typists in the Phoenix Building" (Quadrant 26, 1963) which she has chosen not to include. The poems she has included in "The Forest" contribute to the unity of *Five Senses*, as a determination of her work up to 1963. The title itself is significant, as drawn from a poem published seven years earlier, and perhaps defining the aspiration behind her verse since that time. "Five Senses" describes the effort to win "shape's most pure serenity" from an incoherent and imperfect world, through the creative activity of the poet:

```
Now my five senses
gather into a meaning
all acts, all presences;
and as a lily gathers
the elements together,
in me this dark and shining,
that stillness and that moving,
these shapes that spring from nothing,
become a rhythm that dances,
a pure design
```

while the poet's activity in turn is guided by something beyond his knowing, so that the poem at once embodies the union of his creative mind and the world outside it, and yet forms a reality transcending them both:

```
While I'm in my five senses
they send me spinning
all sounds and silences,
all shape and colour
as thread for that weaver,
whose web within me growing
follows beyond my knowing
some pattern sprung from nothing—
a rhythm that dances
and is not mine.
```

At such moments—and poems as early as "Wonga Vine" are their record—the "two lives" become one.

**Criticism: John K. Ewers (essay date 1968)**


*[Using his review of The Other Half (1966) as an occasion to write a retrospective of Wright's career, Ewers traces her development from regionalist to universalist, and concludes that she is a mystic with a poetic voice.]*
Before attempting to come to terms with Judith Wright's latest volume, *The Other Half*, I propose, first to take a brief sampling of what critics and reviewers had to say about her earlier work as it appeared, and then to examine it in more detail as a whole. This will enable us to establish her poetic background, to mark some common factors to be found in all her poetry and the differences that emerge from time to time.

Much credit is due to C. B. Christesen, editor of *Meanjin* in which a number of her poems had already appeared, for publishing her first book, *The Moving Image* (1946). This brought nothing but praise from the critics. Professor S. Musgrove said [in *Southerly* 8, No. 3 (1947)]; "This book confirms what we have for some time suspected from Judith Wright's periodical pieces, that she is the only poet among the younger Australians who can challenge the stature of R. D. FitzGerald." Nan McDonald, herself a poet, wrote: "After wading through many books of verse where only a faint glimmer of poetry haunts the bog of words, the reader can ask nothing better than to be dealt the old familiar blow that says, beyond all shadow of doubt, 'This is poetry'. Judith Wright's first book, *The Moving Image*, does that." *Woman to Man* (1949) was no less enthusiastically received. By the time H. M. Green had published the second edition of his anthology, *Modern Australian Poetry*, in 1952, he was prepared on the evidence of these two volumes alone to place her "among the principal poets writing in English today". Still confining himself to these two books, Green amplified this further in his *A History of Australian Literature*, Vol. 2, 1923–1950: "A couple of lines that certainly and several whole poems that probably belong to world literature; half a dozen poems that are among the best of their kind in the present day: it is an amazing production for a woman of thirty-five, and it fixes Judith Wright's position, alongside those of FitzGerald and Slessor, among the first of living poets, in Australia or elsewhere."

There was less enthusiasm for the third volume, *The Gateway* (1953). Elyne Mitchell [in *Southerly* 16, No. 1 (1955)] regretted that the language and the imagery were "similar to those recording the spiritual journeys of other poets", and T. Inglis Moore [in *Meanjin* 17, No. 3 (1958)] found "a relaxing of the high tension, a recurring sense of uncertainty, a feeling that the poet has stopped on her path to look around, unsure of her way". About the fourth volume, *The Two Fires* (1955) the critics themselves were divided. Someone writing in *Southerly*, No. 2, 1956, with the initials of J. T. declared that many poems "lend colour to a suspicion that the author is forcing her art". He even went so far as to suggest that "half-baked critics or importunate publishers may have hurried this fine poet into putting out a fourth book before she was ready to do so". But Robert D. FitzGerald (who is certainly no "half-baked critic") after commenting on the changing direction shown in this new volume, said "the earlier impressions return of poetry that has almost everything we could ask of it", adding later that "one is continuously conscious of a power of vision beyond the ordinary sight of mankind" [*Meanjin* 15, No. 2 (1956)]. In the final chapter of his History already referred to—a chapter bringing the record up to 1960—H. M. Green amended his previously expressed opinion that Judith Wright was "essentially lyrist rather than intellectual". This he said, no longer held, for her third and fourth books showed her "moving inward, less often making her vision concrete and lyrical with pictures and lovely images and more often realizing some inner experience". He conceded that this showed "her poetic attitude is not static, an important thing for a writer who has already made so high a place for herself.

Judith Wright's fifth volume was *Birds* (1962). F. H. Mares in *The Australian Book Review* [Vol. 2, No. 6] said: "These are beautifully wrought small poems: I had hoped for a great deal more, and I fear a withdrawal here." There is a tendency, it seems, for the contemporary reviewer to anticipate what the writer may do next and to be disappointed when his own anticipation is not fulfilled. It was timely therefore that these five volumes should be followed by two selections, each made by the poet herself, so that we could get the flavour of her work as a whole up to that point. The first of these was in Angus & Robertson's Australian Poets series and appeared in 1963, to be followed by a rather fuller selection, *Five Senses*, in 1964. Both contained some poems under the heading of "The Forest" not previously published in book form, of which more will be said presently.
This then was the position as far as some critics and reviewers saw it up to the publication of her latest volume of new work, *The Other Half*. It was clear that all were agreed that Judith Wright was a poet of considerable statute, but not all were prepared to concede that her genius had not sometimes faltered in her six published volumes (seven, if we count "The Forest" poems which occur for the first time in the two volumes of selections).

I have now spent some weeks reading at leisure Judith Wright's entire published poems in an attempt to distil from them some unifying essence. When met again after many years, a number of poems in her early volumes assumed, for me, the classic quality of memorableness. What I wish to convey by this is that apparently these poems had at earlier readings entered into my subconscious to a degree I had not realized. Others familiar with this author's work, attempting a similar exercise in re-acquaintance, would no doubt share this experience and be prepared to name further poems which produced a similar effect on them. Among those which came to me in the rereading with the force and familiarity of old and well-tried companions were "Nigger's Leap: New England", "Bullocky" and "South of my Days" from the first volume, "Woman to Man", "Woman's Song", "Woman to Child" and "Lost Child" from the second, "Birds" "Old House" from the third, and the title poem from the fourth. There were others where the impact of familiarity was also present but to a lesser degree. This is a very subjective approach and mere memorableness for any individual is not necessarily a virtue. When it is coupled with the undoubted quality which such poems possess and when it is shared with a great number of other readers—as I believe is true of Judith Wright's work—it means a great deal.

One of the strongest impressions I received was the relationship much of her work bears to the time it was written. This can be a disadvantage; it can make for ephemeral work if the poet is too closely a victim of her time. But Judith Wright manages to transcend the ephemeral where many a lesser poet has been engulfed by it. This is well illustrated by the mood of most of the poems in *The Moving Image*. This was published in 1946, but all the poems except one are grouped under the heading: Poems, 1940–1944; that is, they were written during World War II. The title poem is undated, but it *could* be regarded as a war-poem with its overtones of destruction, although it is much more than that in its full implications.

World War II was a time when Australia's survival as a nation in the Pacific received its first full challenge and this evoked a great deal of inward-looking. We might not last long, the time seemed to say. What are we? How far have we come? The year before the outbreak of war had seen the announcement of the Jindyworobak manifesto by Rex Ingamells who gathered around him a group of nationalistic poets whose talents (many of them limited) drew also upon this inward-looking fostered by the threat to survival. Writers in this group over-stressed background and local colour, and aroused a good deal of hostility in certain quarters. Judith Wright was never close to the movement, but when asked by its founder to contribute to a review of its achievements at the end of 10 years she offered a comment that was untouched by the rancour that coloured the criticisms of many others.

"The Russian, the English, the Norwegian writer can concentrate his attention on the social or psychological problem in hand; his background is already filled in, taken for granted" she wrote in an article called *Perspective* [in *Jindyworobak Review* (1948)]. "But the Australian background, important as it is to the Australian psychology, has never thus been assimilated. So a kind of split in the writer's consciousness is often manifest; he cannot solve his immediate problem, he cannot keep attention concentrated on his foreground, while his background keeps intruding. Perhaps this duality, this unsolved problem, is partly the cause of the gaps in Australian literature, and the curious lack of writers with anything like a 'body of work' to their credit. Only the single-minded with a track of their own to follow, or the genuinely great writer, can bypass that boulder in the road. (Henry Handel Richardson managed it in the Mahony trilogy, Slessor and FitzGerald managed it, though neither of them can be called prolific writers; Hugh McCrae and his circle managed it by simply detaching themselves completely from the ground and flying over it, but nevertheless their work as a
"It seems to me that the Jindy movement was essentially an effort to get the problem into perspective. I don't necessarily mean that the Jindy writers themselves have done that, but rather that in the ensuing argument the issues found some kind of clarification; and in fact the work of the outstanding Jindy writers has to some extent already broken the problem down. To emphasize our regionalism instead of trying to elude it—this has had a value in itself, and it has performed the further function of leading to a reaction against itself. That is to say, that having found out what happens when one tries to treat the problem as an end in itself, it is now possible to apply the knowledge. The regional, the national outlook has a value, and no doubt some writers do their best work within such a closed circuit. But there are other jobs to do; and Jindyworobak has probably contributed something towards finding the means to do them. It may be that because of the Jindy movement, even those most fiercely opposed or most indifferent to it know themselves a little better.”

The italics at the end are mine. Whether, in fact, Judith Wright herself was opposed or indifferent to the Jindyworobak attitude is not clear, but her poetry in this first volume stands in sharp contrast to that of the bulk of Jindyworobak verse in that, while sometimes saying the same thing, it says it from much greater depth. Reg Ingamells had written in his first book of verse published ten years earlier:

It's a pleasant enough concept and here put forward probably for the first time, but it is shallow and poetically not distinguished. Judith Wright in "Nigger's Leap: New England" puts a similar thought into much richer language:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?

She follows this with an extension of thought to the oneness of man, an extension, it may be added, which seldom if ever entered into the verse of the Jindyworobaks:

O all men are one man at last. We should have known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.

Her main preoccupation in this first volume is with what we have grown out of; it derives from the inward-looking that was part of the time in which she was writing. It occurs over and over again. In "Country Town" she says:

This is no longer the landscape that they knew,
the sad green enemy country of their exile,
those branded men whose songs were of rebellion.

This is a landscape that the town creeps over;
a landscape safe with bitumen and banks.
The hostile hills are netted in with fences
and the roads lead to houses and the pictures.
Thunderbolt was killed by Constable Walker
long ago; the bones are buried, the story printed.
And yet in the night of the sleeping town, the voices:
This is not ours, not ours the flowering tree.
What is it we have lost and left behind?

Where the Jindyworobaks were accusing early settlers of despoiling the countryside, thundering imprecations about "the rape of the land", Judith Wright was enquiring into the sources from which she herself had sprung. The poem concludes with a call to

Remember Thunderbolt, buried under the air-raid trenches.
Remember the bearded men singing of exile.
Remember the shepherds under their strange stars.

That this call for remembrance is, for her, very personal is shown in many places and nowhere better than in "South of my Days" which begins:

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

and ends:

If there has been despoilment, this seems to imply, then we are all touched with some guilt and out of the original hate-love relationship between our forebears and this alien earth has come the fulfilment of love.

Her poem, "Bullocky", expressed in a ballad-like form she was not often to use again, became at once a favourite anthology piece. The first three stanzas suffice to show its mood:

Beside his heavy-shouldered team,
thirsty with drought and chilled with rain,
he weathered all the striding years
till they ran widdershins in his brain:

Till the long solitary tracks
etched deeper with each lurching load
were populous before his eyes,
and fiends and angels used his road.

All the long straining journey grew
a mad apocalyptic dream,
and he old Moses, and the slaves
his suffering and stubborn team.

This is landscape poetry, but it is a landscape with people. In "South of my Days" there was old Dan:

Seventy years of stories he clutches round his bones.
Seventy summers are hived in him like old honey.

In "Brother and Sisters" there are Millie, Lucy and John struggling against time and lack of fulfilment on a no-good farm:
The road turned out to be a cul-de-sac;  
stopped like a lost intention at the gate  
and never crossed the mountains to the coast.
But they stayed on.

"Half-caste Girl" is pure Jindyworobak, but written with much deeper insight:

Little Josie buried under the bright moon
is tired of being dead, death lasts too long.
She would like to push death aside, and stand on the hill
and beat with a waddy on the bright moon like a gong.

Across the hills, the hills that belong to no people
and so to none are foreign,
once she climbed high to find the native cherry;
the lithe darkhearted lubra
who in her beads like blood
dressed delicately for love
moves her long hands among the strings of the wind,
singing the songs of women,
the songs of love and dying.

Most of the poetry in The Moving Image is essentially regional; its appeal could be largely to those who, however vicariously, have shared the emotions which regionalism of any sort calls up. We are reminded of her words in the Jindyworobak review: "The regional, the national outlook has a value, and no doubt some writers do their best work within such a closed circuit. But there are other jobs to do." Judith Wright worked magnificently within that closed circuit, but did not confine herself to it. Even in this early volume "The Company of Lovers" entirely forsakes regionalism. It does, however, remain a poem of its time, the time of a world at war:

We meet and part now over all the world;
we, the lost company,
take hands together in the night, forget
the night in our brief happiness, silently.
We, who sought many things, throw all away
for this one thing, one only,

remembering that in the narrow grave
we shall be lonely.

Death marshals up his armies round us now.
Their footsteps crowd too near.
Lock your warm hands above the chilling heart
and for a time I live without my fear.
Grop in the night to find me and embrace
for the dark preludes of the drums begin,
and round us, round the company of lovers,
death draws his cordons in.

This poem serves to introduce us to the prevailing mood of her second volume, Woman to Man. Love is a recurring theme in these and later poems. At first it begins as the love between man and woman; later it takes
on a more transcendental quality—love, the moving force of all life. Just as the landscape poems, wherever they occur in the flow of her poetry, are peopled with personal memories or derivations, so her love poems have a deeply personal quality. It is doubtful whether any aspect of what she says in the title-poem of this volume has ever been better said and a great deal would be lost were it not quoted in full:

The eyeless labourer in the night,  
the selfless, shapeless seed I hold,  
built for its resurrection day—  
silent and swift and deep from sight  
foresees the unimagined light.

This is no child with a child's face;  
this has no name to name it by;  
yet you and I have known it well.  
This is our hunter and our chase,  
the third who lay in our embrace.

This is the strength that your arm knows,  
the arc of flesh that is my breast,  
the precise crystals of our eyes.  
This is the blood's wild tree that grows  
the intricate and folded rose.

This is the maker and the made;  
this is the question and reply;  
the blind head butting in the dark,  
the blaze of light along the blade.  
Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

The two poems which follow this, "Woman's Song" and "Woman to Child", and another later in the book, "The Unborn", are complementary pieces. They serve to establish the fact that the physical "love" of which she writes here, distinct from the more transcendental "love" to be found in many other poems, is always that of the woman. It is the love for the child she is to bear; it is never the passionate love that men feel and write of, never the pursuit and the capture. Nor is it romantic love which is the subject of many poems, most of them by men and some by women aping men. In this respect her attitude towards love is similar to that of Mary Gilmore, although its expression is usually more intense, more poetic. There are other similarities between these two women poets, notably an emotional drawing from the well of the past, an awareness of the significance in our history of the displaced people, the aborigines (although here Mary Gilmore's poetry is far more emotive) and a strong sense of common humanity. But there are sharp differences, too. Both are feminine, but Mary Gilmore is sometimes also feminist, a characteristic never to be found in Judith Wright's work or her personal attitudes. Nor does she espouse causes or champion the underdog. And nothing could be more out of character than to imagine Miss Wright rushing off to join a socialist colony in Paraguay or anywhere else!

Many poems in this second volume make reference to children: "Child in Wattle Tree", "The Child", "The World and the Child", "Night and the Child". All these are to some degree the result of an intense awareness of the impingement of age upon youth, part of the duality which is stressed in many other ways in other poems: light and dark, real and unreal, life and death. In "Lost Child", a section of the closing sequence of poems in this book, she gives a hint of the metaphysical realms she is to explore more frequently and at considerable depth in later volumes:
Is the boy lost? Then I know where he is gone.
He has gone climbing the terrible crags of the Sun.

The searchers go through the green valley, shouting his name;
the dogs are moaning on the hill for the scent of his track;
but the men will all be hoarse and the dogs lame
before the Hamilton's boy is found or comes back.
Through the smouldering ice of the moon he is stumbling alone.
I shall rise from my dark and follow where he is gone.

I heard from my bed his bugle breath go by
and the drum of his heart in the measure of an old song.
I shall travel into silence, and in that fierce country
When we meet he will know he has been away too long.
They are looking for him now in the vine-scrub over the hill,
but I think he is alone in a place that I know well.

Is the boy lost? Then I know where he is gone.
He is climbing to Paradise up a river of stars and stone.

It may have been because the contemporary critics expected some blending of the regionalism of her first
volume and the various interpretations of love that coloured her second that they paused uncertainly before the
third. Its significance seems to be crystallized in four lines from the title-poem, which is placed right at the
very end of the book:

In the land of oblivion
among the black-mouthed ghosts,

I knew my Self
the sole reality.

Henceforth and in many different ways, the poet is to embark upon a voyage of discovery in Self, a Self that is
not merely of this time but in all time. There are hints of a growing wonder at the miracle of life and of the
lifegiving force, love. This is the theme of the opening poem, "Dark Gift", in which the poet marvels at the
growth of a flower that "begins in the dark where life is not" until with the calyx folded she cries:

Open, green hand, and give
the dark gift you hold.

Oh wild mysterious gold!
Oh act of passionate love!

There is also a growing preoccupation here with the receding of youth, with the approach of age, although she
is still only in her late thirties. Often she re-states with no less force and vision the regionalism of the best
poems in The Moving Image. Thus we have "Eroded Hills", "Drought", "Unknown Water", "The Ancestors"
and most memorably "Old House", which begins:

Where now outside the weary house the pepperina,
that great broken tree, gropes with its blind hands
and sings a moment in the magpie's voice, there he stood once,
that redhaired man my great-great-grand-father,
his long face amiable as an animal's,
and thought of vines and horses.
He moved in that mindless country like a red ant,
running tireless in the summer heat among the trees—
the nameless trees, the sleeping soil, the original river—
and said that the eastern slope would do for a vineyard.

It was no doubt the diversity of subjects dealt with in this third volume which aroused some misgivings in the minds of contemporary critics, which caused T. Inglis Moore to feel that "the poet has stopped on her path to look around, unsure of her way". But one cannot share Elyne Mitchell's regret that often her language and imagery were "similar to those recording the spiritual journeys of other poets". What different language or imagery could possibly be desirable for "Birds", one of her most profound poems?

Whatever the bird is, is perfect for the bird.
Weapon kestrel hard as a blade's curve,
thrush round as a mother or a full drop of water
fruit-green parrot wise in his shrieking swerve—
all are what bird is and do not reach beyond bird.

Must we deny the validity of "weapon kestrel", "blade's curve", "round as a mother or a full drop of water"?
One wonders whether this poem arose out of the fragmentary thought in R. D. FitzGerald's Essay on Memory: that sometimes one sees "the bird's flight as the bird". Judith Wright is here emphasizing the apparent simplicity of motives guiding the lives of the "cruel kestrel", the "thrush in the trembling dew beginning to sing", the "parrot clinging and quarrelling and veiling his queer eye". This is contrasted with the complexity of human motives:

But I am torn and beleaguered by my own people.
The blood that feeds my heart is the blood they gave me
and my heart is the house where they gather and fight for dominion—
all different, all with a wish and a will to save me,
to turn me into the ways of other people.

The poem concludes with a yearning to

…. melt the past, the present and the future in one
and find the words that lie behind all these languages.
Then I could fuse my passions into one clear
stone and be simple to myself as the bird is to the bird.

If the imagery lacks the sharp Australianism that characterized her more regional poetry, it is because she has moved out of regionalism into the universal. Her future work is to move more and more in that direction, yet in a subtle way its universal aspects are involved in the regional. Thus in her fourth book, The Two Fires, we have "The Wattle Tree" with its opening lines:

The tree knows four truths—
earth, water, air, and fire of the sun.
The tree holds four truths in one.
Root, limb and leaf unfold
out of the seed, and these rejoice
till the tree dreams it has a voice
to join four truths in one great word of gold.
It could be any tree—oak, elm, cedar or what you will. But it is a wattle tree; the last line tells us that. Here, too, is emerging a theme that is to recur more and more frequently in her work—the kinship with nature, yet an apartness, a separateness from it. Under the bark of a "Scribbly-gum" she finds:

……the written track
of a life I could not read.

However, *The Two Fires* is once again a book arising out of its time. The poet is very personally concerned with the threat of man's destruction through the possible use of the atom bomb. The title-poem shows this concern in a magnificent poetic conception of the earth born out of fire and returning to fire:

My father rock, do you forget the kingdom of the fire?
The aeons grind you into bread—

into the soil that feeds the living and transforms the dead;
and have we eaten in the heart of the yellow wheat
the sullen unforgetting seed of fire?

And now set free by the climate of man's hate,
that seed sets time ablaze.
The leaves of fallen years, the forest of living days,
have caught like matchwood. Look, the whole world burns.
The ancient kingdom of the fire returns.
And the world, that flower that housed the bridegroom and the bride,
burns on the breast of night.
The world's denied.

Other poems like "The Precipice", "West Wind", "Two Generations", and "Searchlight Practice" also develop this concept. They contain lines that stamp her as a poet of the highest possible artistry and sensitivity, lines that cause the reader to pause and marvel when he comes upon them. Has the dilemma of our times ever been better stated than in these from "West Wind"?

for to love in a time of hate and to live in a time of death
is lonely and dangerous as the last leaf on the tree
and wrenches the stem of the blood and twists the words from truth.

Her kinship with nature persists in the much slighter poems of her fifth volume, *Birds*, which were written for her teenage daughter and are therefore less adult in their approach, but are not quite, as Max Harris has said [in *The Literature of Australia*, ed. by Geoffrey Dutton, 1964], merely the work of a poet who is "keeping her hand in". A lesser poet would have written a very different set of verses for a teenage daughter! Here are some delightful vignettes which, apart from their poetic quality, can only have come from one who has lived close to nature and who has drawn some of her strength from it. Whether it be "that old clever Noah's Ark, the well turned, well-carved pelican with his wise comic eye" or the magpies who "walk with hands in pockets, left and right" and whose song thanks "God with every note" or the chattering Apostle Birds ("How they talked about us")—there is a great deal of shrewd observation here and more than that, a quality of mystic interpretation which, if the single audience for which they were meant were extended to others of that age, might well awaken an interest in those aspects of the Australian environment which have so moved and influenced the poet herself.

Those who are unfamiliar with the poetry of Judith Wright could not do better than make an approach to her work through *Five Senses* published in 1964 in Angus & Robertson's Sirius paperback series. Here are most
of her truly memorable poems and it is interesting to note that, as if to challenge some of the contemporary critics, she has chosen heavily from *The Gateway* and *Two Fires*—the third and fourth volumes which caused some concern at the time because of their apparent departure from what had come to be accepted as typical of this writer. It is particularly interesting because it contains twenty-eight poems hitherto unpublished, under the collective title of "The Forest." These take us a step further along the very personal road of Judith Wright's poetry. They are distinguished by the same certainly of language and techniques we have come to expect. The title-poem of this series, although there are many excellent and diverse poems here, seems to me to crystallize simply and unpretentiously the nature of her quest. I quote it in full:

> When first I knew this forest
> its flowers were strange.
> Their different forms and faces
> changed with the seasons' change—
>
> white violets smudged with purple,
> the wild-ginger spray,
> ground-orchids small and single
> haunted my day.
>
> the thick-fleshed Murray-lily,
> flame-tree's bright blood,
> and where the creek runs shallow,
> the cunjevoi's green hood.
>
> When first I knew this forest,
> time was to spend,
> and time's renewing harvest
> could never reach an end.
>
> Now that its vines and flowers
> are named and known,
> like long-fulfilled desires
> those first strange joys are gone.
>
> My search is further.
> There's still to name and know
> beyond the flowers I gather
> that one that does not wither—
> the truth from which they grow.

It is a remarkable poem, less complex than many she has written, yet summarizing, I would suggest, her whole poetic endeavour. The vines and flowers, the familiar things of life whether of nature or of man, are named and known. From time to time she will return to them, but not merely to identify or describe. Henceforth the search is further: to "the truth from which they grow". In this single poem we see her moving, as the whole of her poetic work has moved, from the regional to the universal.

And now, at last, having attempted to distil the essence of her writing, let us now look at her latest collection, *The Other Half* (1966). The concluding piece, "Turning Fifty", reminds us that the poet is now no longer young, no longer the "woman of thirty-five" whose work, on the evidence of two published volumes, H. M. Green found "amazing". At fifty she reviews the times through which she has lived:
Though we've polluted
even this air I breathe
and spoiled green earth;

though, granted life or death,
death's what we're choosing,
and though these years we live
scar flesh and mind,

still, as the sun comes up,
bearing my birthday,
having met time and love
I raise my cup—

dark, bitter, neutral, clean,
sober as morning—
to all I've seen and known—
to this new sun.

Poems written to celebrate one's own birthday are seldom memorable and this is no exception. It is nevertheless impressive in its homely sincerity. This is a coffee cup she is raising, not a convivial glass, and it is clear that she is still possessed by the doubts and fears which were the main theme of The Two Fires. So much profound writing, so much word magic and control, so much that has been accepted as the best of contemporary Australian poetry—all this stems from a woman, now turned fifty, greeting "the new sun" with courage undimmed and, as one knows from what she has already produced, equipped while strength remains with her to continue her quest of ultimate truth.

The themes she has chosen for this latest volume are varied, but there is this recurring note of age, accompanied by a somewhat wistful note of the inevitability of change that age brings. Among the poems in The Forest series was one, "For My Daughter", which reviewed the problem of the woman who is also a mother, her child grown up and going her separate way:

My body gave you then
what was ordained to give,
and did not need my will.
But now we learn to live
apart, what must I do?

"The Curtain", describing the homecoming of a grown child, continues this thought:

So grown you looked, in the same unaltered room,
so much of your childhood you were already forgetting,
while I remembered. Yet in the unforgetting dream
you will come here all your life for renewal and meeting.

It was your breath, so softly rising and falling,
that kept me silent. With your lids like buds unbroken
you watched on their curtain of your life, a stream of shadows moving.
When I touched your shoulder, I too had a little dreamed and woken.
It may be said that Judith Wright, however deeply she feels, however much she is moved by the transience of life or the eternal quest for its underlying truths, will never and can never be dogmatic in her statement. A brief poem, "Wishes", gives her answers to the questions: What do I wish to be? What do I wish to do? To the first she replies, "I wish to be wise". To the second, "I wish to love". The final couplet admits the contradiction:

To love and to be wise?
Down, fool, and lower your eyes.

There are several remarkable poems in this volume. The title-poem is yet another attempt to bring about some reconciliation of opposites which we have noted before. This time the opposites are "the self that night undrowns when I'm asleep" and "my daylight self," the subconscious and the conscious. She brings them tentatively together again in a final couplet:

So we may meet at last, and meeting bless,
And turn into one truth in singleness.

We should perhaps have noted earlier this recurring practice of summing up in a couplet the ideas that the poem has been exploring. In this she is not uniformly successful. There are times when one feels that in her desire to round off a poem as neatly as possible she has yielded a little to rhetoric, a little to emotion. In this couplet I have quoted, one may well wonder whether these two opposites can be reconciled in singleness.

The outstanding poems in The Other Half are "To Hafiz of Shiraz", "Naked Girl and Mirror" and the New Guinea sequence, "The Finding of the Moon". I name these three because of certain intrinsic differences about them, but would not suggest that any others in the volume fall short of the high standard of thought and expression that characterize all Judith Wright's verse. She is, it seems, too fine an artist ever to write a bad poem; if some reach greater heights than others it is because initially they are aimed at greater heights.

"To Hafiz and Shiraz" is prefaced by the statement "the rose has come into the garden, from Nothingness to Being", which reminds us somewhat of an earlier poem, "Dark Gift". Its philosophical theme is the inevitability of fruition, so that it is no longer "any poem" that might follow her pen, but the certainty that in poetry, as in living:

Every path and life leads one way only,
out of continual miracle, through creation's fable,
over and over repeated, but never yet understood,
as every word leads back to the blinding original Word.

"Naked Girl and Mirror" must take its place amongst Judith Wright's finest poems. It is a reflective essay on the problem facing an adolescent girl whose body once served only the elemental needs of childhood, but is now awakening to the fuller needs of maturity and love. This she sees at first as a betrayal and is afraid. She longs to return to what she was but finally realizes that she cannot do this, although she still hopes to retain something of her original self:

In the New Guinea sequence, "The Finding of the Moon", she captures to an extraordinary degree the atmosphere of a tribal village in which a young man, Aruako, turns his back Endymion-like on sensual love in his pursuit of the Moon. It is notable that Miss Wright should depart from her familiar Australian background and that she should with her own poetic vision so successfully enter into this new world. There are some poems here with a quaintly domestic atmosphere that perhaps do not quite do justice to her talents—poems like "To Another Housewife", "Cleaning Day" and "Portrait", but others, although comparatively slight like "The Trap", "A Document" and "Snakeskin on a Gate", show that she has lost nothing of her technical skill or
sensitivity. In short, *The Other Half* is a worthy successor to the volumes that have preceded it. No doubt it will be followed by others if we are to judge from her supplication in the final stanza of "Prayer":

And you, who speak in me when I speak well,  
withdraw not now your grace, leave me not dry and cold.  
I have praised you in the pain of love, I would praise you still  
in the slowing of the blood, the time when I grow old.

What then is the real nature of the genius of Judith Wright? Always she has worked within certain specified limits. Most of her poems are quite short. She has never attempted the epic and has touched only incidentally, through the recalled past, on the heroic. Once or twice she has been tempted towards the slightly satirical ("Eve to her Daughter" in this latest volume is an example), but not very successfully perhaps because this is not fundamentally part of her nature. In the main she has blended the emotions and the intellect, and throughout has developed technical skills which, in spite of attempts by some critics to find influences of Blake and Yeats and T. S. Eliot, have remained peculiarly her own. Not the least of her skills lies in the felicity of her choice of word and phrase and the ability to say a great deal in very few words. Let any who doubt this compare the examples I have given with the language in most other contemporary volumes of Australian poetry.

We have seen how her first two books caused H. M. Green to classify her as a lyricist and how her next two caused him to amend that classification. We have seen how early critics applauded her regional poetry and how some later ones regretted her partial abandonment of the regional for the universal. Throughout a now considerable number of volumes she has established for herself an identity which does not easily fit into any category, but it is clear that she is fundamentally a mystic, seeking through her own personal experiences to find the true significance in all creation of Love and the Word, which in the last analysis are synonymous. That she gives no final answer is not the least of her virtues, since this carries with her a company of readers prepared to go along with her in her quest. There are also many, no doubt, who are less concerned with the quest, but equally prepared to accompany her because of the unique quality of the poetry which she uses to pursue it.

**Criticism: James McAuley (essay date 1968)**


[McAuley was an Australian poet, critic, and educator who influenced his country's literature through his emphasis on traditional poetic forms and techniques and his opposition to the nationalistic tendencies of some Australian writers and critics, including those in the "Jindyworobak" movement that championed native Australian elements in the arts. In the following analysis of several of Wright's poems, McAuley studies both content and mechanics to contrast what he considers Wright's better poetry with her less successful work. He concludes that Wright's best poems are endowed with a consonance of form, content, and purpose that the others, while successful on certain levels, lack.]

I want to consider first of all some of the very good poems in Judith Wright's first two volumes. A few of these stand out in an order of excellence of their own, though surrounded by others of considerable interest.

In *The Moving Image* (1946) the poem 'Bullocky' has proved most durable in general liking and critical estimation. It is an evocation of the pioneer past of the Hunter River district. In the first stanza the word 'widdershins' catches the mind with its unexpected Tightness:
Beside his heavy-shouldered team,
thirsty with drought and chilled with rain,
he weathered all the striding years
till they ran widdershins in his brain:

'widdershins', meaning in the opposite direction or backwards, defines the movement of the rest of the poem, which is a backwards look into time. The bullocky is seen as leading the entry of a new people into a new Promised Land. The identification of the bullocky with Moses is imputed in stanzas 2 and 3 to the bullocky himself, more perhaps for dramatic emphasis than as a probability. The result is a double-image effect. We see the bullocky, but we see also a symbolic fiction superimposed on or coalescing with the natural scene:

All the long straining journey grew
a mad apocalyptic dream,
and he old Moses, and the slaves
his suffering and stubborn team.

Then in his evening camp beneath
the half-light pillars of the trees
he filled the steepled cone of night
with shouted prayers and prophecies.

The latter stanza presents the bullocky at his camp-fire, but the scene is also wrought to a cathedral-image: the trees are pillars, the firelight scoops out a steepled cone in the dark. There is thus the simultaneous presentation of type and anti-type: a meaningful symbolic pattern is adduced from the past, together with the new reality which fulfils the pattern in an unexpected way. The effect in the above stanzas is mainly a visual one: it is not just a stir of allusions in the words, for a definite picture is created.

In the next stanza the double-image effect is produced in sound:

While past the camp fire's crimson ring
the star-struck darkness cupped him round,
and centuries of cattlebells
rang with their sweet uneasy sound.

A delicate play of meanings and associations occurs on the word 'centuries', meaning hundreds, as well as ages of time. The bells are actual in the bullocky's time, but they also ring out of a deep and mysterious past (a 'star-struck darkness'), because the patterns of the past are being reenacted. It seems right to allow the cathedral image of the previous stanza to influence the reading, so that the suggestion of sanctuary bells is not excluded, though not unduly stressed. Perhaps there is also, in the use of the word 'centuries', a faint sidelong reminiscence of Traherne's use of the word in *Centuries of Meditations*. The word 'uneasy' in the last line is superbly right, combining as it does an accurate physical impression with a vague fleeting suggestion of uncertainty. It is surely permissible to explicate these subtle subordinate filaments of meaning or association, so long as it is understood that by bringing them to the surface in sharp focus we tend to distort their proper effect: the reader must restore the disturbed balance when he turns from the interpreter's laborious clumsiness back to the text—with perception nevertheless sharpened, one hopes.

In the last stanza of 'Bullocky' the double-image effect reaches its climax and justification. The bullocky lies buried in the soil as Moses was buried in the Promised Land. The root of the vine—the reference is to the vineyards of the Hunter River district—reaches down to grasp the bone:
O vine grow close upon that bone
and hold it with your rooted hand.
The prophet Moses feeds the grape,
And fruitful is the Promised Land.

Again the effect is sharply visual: the root becomes at the same time a hand reaching down to take hold of the past. The meaning is that the fruitfulness of the land is rooted in the lives and work of the pioneers, and it must hold close to its origins, its tradition, and be nourished by it.

The typology used in the poem, comparing the new settlement to the entry into the Promised Land, has been a natural and recurring one in colonial literatures. Sometimes it has been required to carry the burden of Utopian hallucinations, staling down to clichés of political rhetoric. But Judith Wright does not embarrass us with the crackpot portentousness that O'Dowd would have put into such an analogy. Equally, she did not feel compelled to make the analogy work with that evasive irony which is a disfiguring tic in modern poetry. There is an obvious tension between the hallowed grandeur of Moses and the raw actuality of the bullocky: but the poem accepts this and overcomes it. The bullocky's role is ennobled without being falsified.

The poem's quiet assurance in what it is saying is reflected in its simple firm structure. The iambic tetrameter quarains, rhyming only in the second and fourth lines, regularly divide, according to their grammatical articulation, into matching halves: two lines plus two lines. Each of these halves tends, moreover, to form a single long line, an octameter with a crease in the middle:

Then in the evening camp beneath the half-light pillars of the trees
He filled the steepled cone of night with shouted prayers and prophecies.

Within this metrical framework the poem moves by successive statements, not by argument. The statements are for the most part grammatically co-ordinate, linked by 'and' or an equivalent. There is also a good deal of parallelism, though not too rigidly enforced:

Grass is across the wagon-tracks,
and plough strikes bone across the grass,
and vineyards cover all the slopes
where the dead teams were used to pass.

Particularly in the later part of the poem, the effect of this organization is responsorial: the second half of the stanza 'answering' the first as in the Ambrosian hymns. There is thus a fundamental constitutive dualism governing the poem in every aspect. [McAuley adds in a footnote: The stanzas also fall naturally into couples, with the exception of stanza 3, which stands on its own. It is devoted to making explicit the analogy underlying the rest of the poem. The additional (superfluous?) character of this stanza, with its slightly officious explanation by slightly strained phrasing ('mad apocalyptic dream' is questionable, and the inversion of 'slaves' and 'team' just a little awkward), seems evident. If I seem to be peering at the structure with niggling pedantry, my excuse is that I want to show how, when Judith Wright is at the height of her inspiration, there is an extraordinary intuitive coherence.]

In the second volume, Woman to Man (1949), the titlepoem is by common consent the summit of her achievement. I hope that a close and rather technical examination of the poem will illuminate its peculiar rightness.

The grammatical structure of 'Woman to Man' is the main engine of its expressive power. Phrase is laid by phrase, clause by clause in a continued insistent parallelism. The successive parallel statements are not linked by co-ordinating conjunctions. To use a technical term, the poem proceeds by parataxis. This simplest of all
forms of grammatical articulation is the mode of a great deal of poetry. A complex grammar with
subordination of clauses as well as varied coordination is natural when the logic is argumentative; but poetry
often moves simply by successive strokes, whose relationships the mind supplies without the need of
connective words. The first stanza moves by appositions: the second and fourth lines amplifying the first, and
the last line amplifying the third:

The eyeless labourer in the night,
The selfless, shapeless seed I hold,
builds for its resurrection day—
silent and swift and deep from sight
foresees the unimagined light.

In the second and third stanzas the parallel clauses and phrases unfold paratactically, except for the third line
of stanza 2 which twists the paradox tighter:

yet you and I have known it well.

This rhetorical parallelism is not static, but dynamic and cumulative, moving forward with increasing urgency
to the climax in the last stanza, when meditation on the mystery of conception and gestation changes into an
anticipation of the moment of birth:

This is the maker and the made;
this is the question and reply;
the blind head butting at the dark,
the blaze of light along the blade.
Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

'The blaze of light' symbolizes the first flash of light and consciousness, but first of all refers literally to the
knife cutting the cord. The sudden change of feeling and direction in the last line is very effective, as the
woman turns from absorption in the inner mystery to utter a direct personal cry to the man.

It is a sign of complete inspiration when the phonic texture of the poem supports the meaning, giving a true
registration of feeling and a sense of woven unity. For example, in the first stanza the sound announced in
'eye' recurs significantly, and together with other details creates an incantatory effect, drawing us into the
woman's absorption in the mystery. One need hardly point out in the last stanza the reinforcement of the
meaning by the heavy insistent alliteration and the management of stress.

Another sign of mastery is the expressive use of 'wordbuild'—the size, shape, and stress-profile of individual
words. Thus in the first two lines there are four emphatic two-syllabled words with the same 'trochaic' profile,
set across the iambic metrical frame, not coinciding with it:

The eyeless labourer in the night,
The selfless shapeless seed I hold

This has its own absorbed insistency, but it also enables the big word 'resurrection' in the third line to emerge
more noticeably:

builds for its resurrection day.

In stanza 2, monosyllables notably predominate, tending to slow the lines and increase the effect of
deliberation. Stanza 3 continues in the first two lines with monosyllables, and thus ensures that the peaked
structure of line 3 stands out:

the precise crystals of our eyes.

(The metrical pattern again cuts across the word-build.) Similarly in this stanza the monosyllables of line 4 enable the important epithets in the last line to emerge with full effect:

the intricate and folded rose.

Judith Wright seems to me to have been at this period of her work a poet who worked intuitively, almost gropingly, towards the expression of a particular sense of the mystery of organic life and process and of human passion. 'Woman to Man' brings these two things into a single focus. When her intuition succeeds, the formal elements of the poetry follow suit: image, grammar, phonic texture, versification come together and co-operate. The phrasing in 'Woman to Man' puts some strain on our understanding, but I think it justifies itself. All the references to the unborn child develop one of two ideas. (1) The child is the product of two persons who have become one; by a metaphorical leap, the child is these two: the man's strength of body, the passionate tension of the woman's breast, the clarity of the eyes of both, constitute the being of this 'third who lay in our embrace'. (2) The child is not just the effect or result of their union: it is also its 'final cause', teleologically speaking: that is, it is the end to which their love is ordered, the end which also determines the process, unconscious but unerring, of growth in the womb.

I should like to consider two other poems in Judith Wright's second volume, which also seem to me to exhibit the coherence of her art at its best. 'The Bull' combines a splendid celebration of organic life—in particular of fulfilled sexuality—with a kind of lament and fear. The first stanza presents an image of sensuous magnificence, to which everything contributes:

In the olive darkness of the sally-trees
silently moved the air from night to day.
The summer-grass was thick with honey-daisies
where he, a curled god, a red Jupiter,
heavy with power among his women lay.

Among the expressive felicities of this texture I hope it won't seem too fanciful to draw attention to the word 'olive' in the first line. Its consonants are picked up again in 'silently moved'; the 'l' sound is then carried forward into 'curled god', while the 'v' sound is carried forward into 'heavy with power'—prominent and highly expressive words which make these linkages of sound effective. This may be conscious artifice on the poet's part, or intuitive Tightness: the distinction is rather unreal. In regard to meaning, 'olive' begins as a colour-descriptive word, but its latent possibilities of suggestion are, it seems to me, stirred retroactively by the image of the curled god, the red Jupiter. The latent suggestions are of ripeness, fullness, oil, anointment, an athletic body gleaming. Again one must admit that explicit analysis tends to distort the text by its thick-fingered laboriousness; but the problem is to make the text account for a complex significance and a sensuous effect which are certainly there.

The poem goes on to show us this sovereign power suddenly lose its godlike authority. It is introduced by the obvious but delightful ingenuity of expressive sound-play in the lines:

But summer's bubble-sound of sweet creek-water dwindles and is silent'

where the kinaesthetic element in the use of sounds may also be noted. The bull is driven by dogs, humiliated, unable to cope with these harrying forces of the outer world. I won't stop to comment on the management of sound-quality and rhythm and word-build in these lines; but I want to draw attention to the grammatical and
rhetorical structure. Again parataxis prevails, though some of the clauses have a simple co-ordination. Again the rhetoric relies heavily on parallelism in phrase and clause. Monotony is avoided in several ways. For example, one of the statements is cast in the form of a command, and two in the form of a question. Moreover the parallelism does not always coincide with the line-structure:

What enemy steals his strength—what rival steals his mastered cows?

In such a poem we may ask what is the full meaning, of which the presented subject is the overt surface? Poetry always has human reference. If it deals with the nonhuman, it does so with some implicit or explicit reference to human concerns. It is noteworthy that the bull is anthropomorphized: he lies heavy with power 'among his women', and the image of the 'curled god, a red Jupiter' is anthropomorphic. Here too there is a visual doubleimage effect: we see the bull in the field, at the same time as we see him as a god. The total result is a rich emblem of human instinctual potency and fulfilment.

Again we may note that the poem does not move dialectically or argumentatively, as if proving a thesis. And there is no prepared irony of the routine contemporary kind. The second part, when the bull is discomfited and humiliated does not react destructively on the values affirmed in the first part. The poem does not say: although the bull seems a god he is only a creature that can be ignominiously reduced to servitude. The paratactic structure preserves the correct relationship: both of the moments of the bull are true and valid, and we must comprehend both in our grasp of reality.

The other poem in the second volume which I want to commend is perhaps a slighter one. 'The Old Prison' does not exhibit the brooding sensual power, the concentrated vehemence of 'Woman to Man' or 'The Bull'; but it has its own intensity and lyrical expressiveness, and again the various factors combine to form a coherent rightness. I should like to point out especially the intonation: that is, the effect of tune created by the varying pitch of the vowels, especially in the first two stanzas. This is a factor of variable importance in poetry, but here it is of the essence:

The rows of cells are unroofed,
a flute for the wind's mouth,
who comes with a breath of ice
from the blue caves of the south.

O dark and fierce day:
the wind like an angry bee
hunts for the black honey
in the pits of the hollow sea.

These stanzas give the images which control the poem. The unroofed prison cells suggest a broken deserted hive: but with an inner contrast in the comparison; for this hive was never fruitful, it is sterile, stored with bitterness not sweetness. The other image is that of a flute with holes, through which the wind blows; and again there is a contrast, for this is a stone flute, its music is bitter and desolating, a cry of despair and isolation.

Once more we may note that the grammatical structure of the poem is mainly paratactic, though there is some simple co-ordination by 'and'. Again monotony is avoided by rhetorical means: one statement is turned into a question, another into an O-exclamation. The parallelism and responsorial effect have a cumulative power in the later part:

Who built and laboured here?
The wind and the sea say
—Their cold nest is broken
and they are blown away.

They did not breed nor love.
Each in his cell alone
cried as the wind now cries
through this flute of stone.

The stanzas do not all, as they do in 'Bullocky', break into two matching halves: there is some local asymmetry within the general dualistic balance of the whole.

Many of the poems in the first two volumes seem to me interesting and valuable, but not to attain the order of excellence of those I have been commenting on. If I have succeeded in showing how the very best poems work, I may provide some clues about what happens in poems of a perceptibly lower order of achievement, admirable as some of these may be in their own way.

The well-liked poem 'South of My Days' in the first volume seems to me to be of a second order of achievement. The poet is in Queensland, thinking back to New England, and summoning up the New England past as 'Bullocky' did in a different way:

South of my day's circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter. …

The poem starts with a well-cadenced memorable rhythm. The phrases are striking, though already with a hint of manufacture and proliferation. Gradually the versification spreads out into that treacherous loopy laxity which has been the snare of many Australian poets since Douglas Stewart showed the way. The line hovers and oscillates uneasily between accessional verse and traditional iambic metre; it prefers the loosening effect of feminine endings—26 out of 40 here—free from the stiffening of rhyme. This kind of verse needs to be constantly galvanized by special devices. The poem rather advertizes its free access to colloquial speech.

Or mustering up in the Bogongs in the autumn
when the blizzards came early. Brought them down; we brought them
down, what aren't there yet. Or driving for Cobb's on the run
up from Tamworth—Thunderbolt at the top of Hungry Hill,
and I give him a wink. I wouldn't wait long, Fred,
not if I was you: the troopers are just behind,
coming for that job at the Hillgrove. He went like a luny,
him on his big black horse.

The colloquial phrasing is accommodated, not in strict counterpoint to a metrical pattern, but rather by bending and relaxing the metrical framework.

In its method the poem belongs to the idiom of the forties in Australia. The formula, which is still in use, was fresher then. Again we may note the paratactic structure, with occasional simple coordination ('and', 'or'). Again there is habitual use of rhetorical parallelism. But now the effect of these forms of organization is not cumulative, but simply one thing after another, strung along a thematic thread. This poem lacks the dynamic development of 'Woman to Man'. Its organization is not much above the level of the shuffled pack of cards to which the old-timer's reminiscences are compared. The theme—the poet's feeling for the New England past—is merely an outline, a hold-all for an assortment of impressions. The poem has to live by the varied momentary attractiveness of its component pieces. The poet is also not fully absorbed in the theme: there
remains a touch of self-consciousness, the matey hearty knowingness of the Australian littérateur showing his easy familiarity with outbackery—the very thing that Judith Wright is blessedly free from for the most part.

Another poem that provokes analysis is the attempt in 'Woman to Child' to repeat the success of 'Woman to Man'. It is akin in theme, similar in method, so that the difference is instructive. Though by no means a mere failure, it does not reach the height of the other poem, and does not, to my apprehension, have the same coherence.

As one tries to analyze it, one can see that instead of all factors coming together co-operatively, there is a continuous incipient disorganization.

For example in stanzas 1 and 2 the child is apparently already born and is being spoken to. In stanza 3 the child being spoken to seems to be back in the womb, not yet born. In stanza 4 the child is again already born.

But even in the opening lines there is a disturbance of the time perspective:

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed.

The child is already an embryo in the first line when the seed 'rises' out of the darkness in the second line. Such an objection may seem ridiculously captious in an individual instance; but these imprecisions and dislocations have a cumulative effect. One becomes aware also in the above lines that the poet is under strain to produce phrasing adequate to the sense of mystery intended. The repetition of 'darkness' is a perfunctory expedient rather than a real find. In the rest of the stanza a new symbol is taken up, the child as microcosm. This does not spring out of the first two lines but is a fresh start, and the two parts of the stanza thus created are not successfully integrated. It is significant that the sounds clash: the rhyme-words 'me' and 'see' chime dissonantly against 'seed', and the off-rhyme 'seed' and 'blood' seems not to accord with the tonality of the poem.

In stanza 2, the microcosm idea is amplified by parallel clauses which don't quite do their work. There is a faint Shakesperean echo in the platitudinous 'multitudinous' stars—the connection with 'multitudinous seas' prompting the oceanic images which follow. The third line fills out the stanza by adding a phrase alliterated to give it life, but lacking in precision:

There swam the sliding continents.

Motion in respect of what? Surely this is not an early reference to the hypothesis of continental drift? Are the continents 'sliding' through air but also 'swimming' because surrounded by water? In the next two lines the segmented phrasing is not rhythmically strong, and the last line leaves us suspended between three possible meanings:

and love that knew not its beloved.

I presume that this means that the unborn child did not know whom it would love in the future. But this idea is blurred by other possible interpretations: that the child did not yet know its mother; or that the mother held within herself love for the child she did not yet know. An unresolved triplicity of possible meaning could, of course, be the precise intention of the poet; but there is nothing to suggest that this is so.

By the third stanza the poet has sunk into deeper difficulty. An O-exclamation tries to give the poem a new impulse, producing an infelicitous tricycle of sound, O-o-o, in the first line. The difficulty of seeing the syntax of this stanza, or grasping it when it is read aloud reveals that something is wrong.
The child—now an embryo awaiting birth—is 'node and focus of the world' and this 'node and focus' is in a well. The well 'mirrors' (reflects in water? conforms in shape to?) the child's 'sleeping shape'. One has to scratch up tentative meanings, which prove unsatisfactory. Evidently the poet was worried about this intractable stanza, because in the 1963 selection entitled *Five Senses* she attempted a re-punctuation, which created the appearance of new logical connections, but without clarifying the sense or making it move more naturally:

O node and focus of the world—
I hold you deep within that well
you shall escape and not escape—
that mirrors still your sleeping shape,
that nurtures still your crescent cell.

Is it now the world that 'mirrors' the sleeping shape and nurtures the crescent cell, as a macro-womb? The poet abandoned this unprofitable 1963 revision in the 1965 Australian Poets selection, which goes back to the original version.

In the last stanza, a partial recovery gets under way, but even here the parataxis and parallelism suddenly get out of hand and set up a thumping burlesque rhythm with an inappropriate House-that-Jack-Built effect:

I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit….

I have been pulling rather gracelessly at the fabric of this poem because I think it shows how some failure, however slight, in the poet's intuitive grasp of the theme has spreading ill-effects which ingenuity cannot fully overcome. Meanings, images, syntax, phonic texture, versification do not grow perfectly together; there are hair-line cracks, and bits of patchwork. Nevertheless, we do respond to the imaginative riches of the poem: the possibilities of the theme, the images, the symbolism, are actualized to a considerable extent, whether or not I am right in the foregoing analysis of certain defects.

At a certain point, in the career of most poets, the first élan ceases. There is a time of re-assessment: a need to deepen or widen one's range, a change in values or emphasis. The passage from one state to another is often through darkness and bafflement. Sometimes the poetic solution lies precisely in including this experience of defeat within a new victory. This seems to me to happen in some of the fine later poems of Judith Wright, such as 'Phaius Orchid' and 'The Forest', where it is not only a metaphysical search that is expressed but also the sense of being foiled in that search. The best of Judith Wright's later poetry is not an attempt to reproduce the 'primitive' intensity of the earlier successes but represents the emergence of a more critical awareness, and a fuller conscious control. 'For My Daughter' is a return to the subjectmatter of 'Woman to Child'; it is better articulated, though not as sensuously rich. 'Sports Field' develops an extended allegory, which is not a mode used earlier. It has a poignancy which is a gift of the experienced heart. In *The Other Half* (1966), 'Portrait' and 'Naked Girl and Mirror' and 'A Document' stand for a continuing conquest of personal experience—I must admit that I shy away from some other poems which go on about poetry and being a poet. A close formal analysis of the best of the later work would certainly reveal some continuity with the earlier work, but also some difference in spirit, reflected in change and development in method and organization.
Criticism: Devindra Kohli (essay date 1971)


[Here, Kohli contrasts Wright's work with the more overtly sensual poems of Indian poet Kamala Das. Kohli argues that words and communication have a higher value in Judith Wright's poetic vision of love than they do in the poetry of Das, whose emphasis on passion "makes words irrelevant." The critic also maintains that Wright's work depicts love as a source of contentment and completion.]

Robert Graves describes our age as one of 'lovelessness' and asserts that true poetry comes from 'the state of being in love'. His vision is much more comprehensive and complex than it appears to be for the intensity with which his man-persona does homage to the Woman who is 'the more important partner in this difficult relationship' has a sense of terror and doom in it—perhaps because it grows out of the landscape of war. It is useful to turn to Judith Wright, whose love poetry, besides being a delicate and truthful communication of Woman to Man, is a distinct and fruitful assimilation of the darkness and light of the Australian landscape. 'The writer', says Judith Wright, 'must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures'. It is her strength that she writes poetry which has the physical richness of her landscape and an 'intellectual pride' in the contemplation of the continuity of life. There is a sense of largeness in her lyrical contemplation, a feeling of an open-hearted ease: 'It is because of the joy in my heart / that I am your fit mourner'. This feeling lies behind every gesture she makes:

We are the white grave-worms of the grave.
We are the eyeless beginning of the world.
Oh blind, kind flesh, we are the drinking seed
that aches and swells towards its flower of love.
"The City Asleep"

She takes into herself 'all living things that are', and thus 'My days burn with the sun, / my nights with moon and star'. This sense of an open-hearted ease, this receptive calm, as distinct from the constraining tensions of A. D. Hope, is reflected not only in her organic imagery but in the controlled assertiveness of tone, as well as in the traditional rhythms enacting the circular repetition of the organic life:

Here where I walk was the green world of a child;
the infinity of day that closed in day,
the widening spiral turning and returning,
the same and not the same, that had not end.
Does the heart know no better than to pray
that time unwind its coil, the bone unbuild
till that lost world sit like a fruit in the hand—
till the felled trees rise upright where they lay
and leaves and birds spring on them as they stand?
"The Moving Image"

Her passionate concern with earth and time, and her search for values which can resolve the dichotomy of 'the endless circle of time and star / that never chime with the blood', lead her to the realization of the power of love. Love is a true metaphor for her feminine interaction with life, for it turns upon the strength of a mother-child relationship. In 'Power', she summons the power of Love as 'awful voice', and then taking heart replies: '… even to rejoice / calling myself your child'. Or sometimes she personifies Love, and like a mother affirms its power and beauty, again, as in 'The Moving Image':

55
I am the maker. I have made both time and fear, knowing that to yield to either is to be dead. All that is real is to live, to desire, to be, till I say to the child I was, 'It is this; it is her. In the doomed cell I have found love's whole eternity.'

Unlike Kamala Das, the Indian poet, who notwithstanding the rich traditions available within her own national culture, turns to the intensity of love as the human affirmative, Judith Wright celebrates such an affirmative as a meaningful inter-relationship with the landscape. This is refreshingly valid in the absence of the alternative of a native tradition. Caught between her Australian identity and the identity deriving from the use of English, she attempts to revive 'the song [that] is gone'; 'the dance / [that is] secret with the dancers in the earth' manifests itself in terms of the most traditional of themes, love. The search for 'the hunter [who] is gone' fructifies in 'ordinary love' which offers to Judith Wright 'the solitudes of poetry', and also a sense of personal identity. Whether it is an organic kinship with the landscape:

All the hills' gathered waters feed my seas who am the swimmer and the mountain-river; and the long slopes' concurrence is my flesh who am the gazer and the land I stare on; and dogwood blooms within my winter blood, and orchards fruit in me and need no season. 

['For New England']

Or, in the narrower sense, with the lover and the child:

This is no child with a child's face; this has no name to name it by; yet you and I have known it well. This is our hunter and our chase, the third who lay in our embrace.

['Woman to Man']

Whether it is pain or joy, it is 'blood's red thread' which unites all her perceptions and gives them a sense of organic completeness. There is almost always a frank recognition of the incompleteness of the woman, for she can speak for the woman:

The heart can blaze with candour as though it housed a star; but this my midnight splendour is not my own to wear: it lights by what you are.

['Five Senses']

This obsessive presence of the image of light shows why, despite the tonal directness of Judith Wright, her love poems modulate more into the intellectual than the sensuous. And it is the intellectual meditativeness which enables her to bring multiple levels of relationship to bear on the 'You and I'. 'You', which lights the passion of her heart, is both the world and the lover. It is also the child who is 'the maker and the made'. 'Blood's red thread … binds us fast in history.' She makes the world, but she is also made by it. She is the creator of the child, but she is incomplete without the man who brings the seed. But then it is the love for the unknown, 'the third who lay in our embrace', which unites the lovers and is
… the strength that your arm knows,
the arc of flesh that is my breast,
the precise crystals of our eyes.
That is the blood's wild tree that grows
the intricate and folded rose.

[‘Woman to Man’]

Man, woman, and the child are the sap, the earth and the tree, and are united by 'blood's red thread' into an organic entity, like Yeats's image of the dancer or the chestnut-tree.

The power of the poems in Woman to Man, and of those like 'Ishtar' from the later volume, lies in the frankness and truthfulness with which Judith Wright celebrates the glory of childbirth. Thus Philip Lindsay [in Poetry Review XLI, No. 4 (July-August 1950)] is led to write ecstatically:

Of Judith Wright's poetry it might well be said that she is the only woman who has kissed and told. Other women have sung of love, but apart from Sappho—and she, after all, was a man in female skin—none have written honestly and without shame of their desires.

He pronounces Judith Wright 'as being the first woman honestly to unbare her lover's heart in verse', in contrast to Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, and Christina Rossetti, whose love poetry is inspired by 'sexual repression' and 'starved hearts' rather than sexual fulfilment. Without undermining these three poets, who, it might well be argued, wrote better poetry, Judith Wright can be compared with Kamala Das whose central theme is love, and whose spontaneity and uninhibited treatment of a woman's passions are unique, because, apart from their poetic merit, they are written against the background of a culture different from, and more conservative than, Judith Wright's. Kamala Das concentrates more particularly on sexual love, and her woman-persona, far from being repressed, speaks with a sense of confessional urgency which should make Lindsay qualify his opinion on Judith Wright:

We came together like two suns meeting, and each
Raging to burn the other out. He said you are
A forest-conflagration and I, poor forest,
Must burn. But lay on me, light and white as embers
Over inert fires, Burn on, elemental
Fire, warm the coal streams of his eternal flesh till
At last, they boiling flow, so turbulent with life.

[‘The Conflagration’]

Both are at their best when they write short poems, though Judith Wright's range and skills are greater. Mrs Das has published only two volumes of poems. And although in the second, there is a noticeable falling-off, the admirable concentration on the feminine point of view, the burning introversion with sexual love never falters, even when, as in 'Composition' and 'The Looking Glass', the tone is patronizing and indulgent and the expression not too happy:

'Captive' describes her love as 'an empty gift, a gilded empty container' and herself as the captive of 'the womb's blinded hunger, the muted whisper at the core'. The poem is ambiguous in tone, but the theme of sexual love receives greater relevance from the unmistakable whisper at the core of the poem that love's fulfilment lies in containment not in emptiness. This theme of the glory of creation, of childbirth as the fulfilment of love, which is the theme of Woman to Man, and is also at the heart of Judith Wright's vision of organic continuity, finds a fine expression in Kamala Das's 'Jaisurya'. In a style which admirably combines the narrative and the meditative, she goes through the whole gamut of feelings preceding and following the birth of a son. Right at the start, she sets the interior mood by describing the outer:
It was again the time of rain and on
Every weeping tree, the lush moss spread like
Eczema, and from beneath the swashy
Earth the fat worms surfaced to explode
Under rain.

The rain is friendly; and by 'sighing, wailing, and roaring' it actually helps the persona briefly to forget her own 'pain'. It is only 'the unloving' who feel pain. And since the persona herself is involved in the loving act of creation, '… the first / Tinge of blood seemed like another dawn / Breaking'. She feels and becomes earth, and finds meaning and fulfilment in love which is not an 'empty container' but is filled with a child:

Walk into the waiting room, I had cried,
When once my heart was vacant, fill the
Emptiness, stranger, fill it with a child.
Love is not important, that makes the blood
Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his
Lust, but is shed as slough at the end of each
Embrace. Only that matters which forms as
Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft
Stir in womb, the foetus growing, for,
Only the treasures matter that were washed
Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them
In.

The poem brings together light and darkness, fire and water, to weave a pattern of feeling which holds itself with the joy of creation. When the rain stops and 'the light was gay on our / Casurina leaves, it was early / Afternoon'. Then comes the child itself 'the sun-drenched golden day'. It is characteristic of Kamala Das, so deep is her assimilation of the Indian landscape, that meaningful things happen to her at or around noon time under the virgin whiteness of the sun. The child is a day that is 'Separated from darkness that was mine / And in me'.

This symbolism of light and dark is at the heart of Judith Wright's love poems, especially those dealing with childbirth. In 'Woman's Song' the woman longs for the birth of the child; she asks it to 'wake in me' for

The knife of day is bright
to cut the thread that binds you
within the flesh of night.

In 'Woman to Child', the act of separation of the child from the mother is seen not as a disunity but an affirmation of an abiding relationship between the day and night:

I wither and you break from me;
yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.

In 'Conch-Shell' the poet glorifies this abiding relationship. After the childbirth, the house is washed clean and

The spiral passage turns upon itself.
The sweet enclosing curve of pearl
Shuts in the room that was the cell of birth.

But this is a new beginning for the 'windless shelter housing nothing'. The child who is the 'delicate argument and hieroglyph / of flesh that followed outward from the germ', is both a culmination of one and a beginning of another argument in organic mystery. In the state of mind following on childbirth, she can 'half-guess' that the creative force 'burns forward still in me against the night':

And here, half-guess, half-knowledge, I contract
into a beast's blind orbit, stare deep down
the cliffs not I have climbed …

The Eliotic echo in 'half-guess, half-knowledge' and the Yeatsian cadences in 'beast's blind orbit' and 'stare' have been made fully her own, though these echoes enrich our understanding of Judith Wright's metaphors of 'the house' (for the womb), 'delicate argument' (for the child), the 'puzzle' (for birth)—all intended to give the weight of history to the persona's sense of continuity of the orbit. Like Kamala Das, Judith Wright is rejoicing in the captivity of 'the womb's blinded hunger'. Though both poets are aware of the pain that its absence or the fulfilment involves, neither successfully relates this pain to the paranoia of contemporary history, as, for example, John Berryman does in 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet', one of the greatest love poems of this century. Berryman's attempt to discover his poetic voice in the voice of Anne Bradstreet, since he cannot do it in the voice of any particular tradition, involves him in a passionate relationship with the woman persona herself. With the help of tortured rhythms and the vocabulary of guilt, suggesting seventeenth-century Calvinism, Berryman dramatizes his personal poetic problem and the need for certitude:

The stanzas which describe the sexual experience and childbirth are perhaps the most lyrical in the poem. It is the woman persona who, retrieved from oblivion, comes alive, and in describing her sexual experience conveys the terror of history:

  faintings black, rigour, chilling, brown
  parching, back, brain burning, the grey pocks
  itch, a mainic stench
  of pustules snapping, pain floods the palm,
  sleepless, or a red shaft with a dreadful start
  rides at the chapel, like a slipping heart.
  My soul strains in one qualm
  ah but this is not to save me but to throw me down.

It is not only an orgasm but a qualm; and the language of ecstasy is also the language of delirium. Though the relationship is adulterous and hence guilt-ridden, it is not lust. It is the poet's impassioned search for meaning and certitude. What is true of sexual love is also true of the outcome of it. As the persona becomes aware of the 'ingrown months, blessing a swelling trance', the world appears both 'strange and merciful'. And instead of a sense of release, we have in her an uneasy feeling for liberation:

The poem culminates in the recharged stillness of

  In the rain of pain & departure, still
  Love has no body and presides the sun,
  and elfs from silence melody. I run.
  Hover, utter, still,
  a sourcing, whom my lost candle like the firefly loves.
These lines remind us that Berryman's poetic adultery with Anne Bradstreet reverberates with an ironic sense of certitude in love and in poetry.

Although Judith Wright has written poems about war, and although her vision encompasses life and death, love and pain, her faith in existence, in the certitudes of beauty, is unflinching. Her relationship with the external world has a strong sense of family. So has her relationship with her lover and child. Graves, whose idea of love is 'nondomestic' and is dominated by the woman, does not delight in the birth of children; he describes 'love at first sight' as the misnaming of 'Discovery of twinned helplessness / Against the huge tug of procreation' [Collected Poems, 1965]. In 'Call it a Good Marriage', he suggests, with some irony, that love can be intense despite a lack of children:

Call it a good marriage:
More drew these two together
Despite a lack of children,
Than pulled them apart.

It is an intensity which grows out of tension; there is no 'comfortable point-of-rest' in Graves's love relationship. Judith Wright uses images of marriage to embody her sense of completeness and 'comfortable point-of-rest'. The sisters in the poem of the same title are old and look nostalgically back to the days of their youth. They can do so with a sense of ease, because they have found their fulfilment in marriage and children:

Thinking of their lives apart and the men they married,
thinking of the marriage-bed and the birth of the first child,
they look down smiling. 'My life was wide and wild,
and who can know my heart? There in that golden jungle
I walk alone', say the old sisters on the veranda.

[Woman to Man]

'In Praise of Marriages' glorifies marriage as a means of knowing 'all possible' of 'this field of power' which 'spreads' out of the marriage of 'the I and the you'. In Kamala Das there is some sense of union, and in The Descendants, it is, happily, viewed in the framework of a family. This gives to some of her old themes a new perspective and to her work a sense of progression, despite the faults of style. One hopes that she will bring to her words a wider range of associations and the quality of irradiation.

Although these two woman poets seem to have similar poetic concerns, they differ in their attitudes to the 'place' of words in the love-experience. For Kamala Das, the intensity of passions makes words irrelevant. In 'Spoiling the Name', she associates name with abstraction:

… why should this name, so
Sweet-sounding, enter not all the room
Where I go to meet a man
Who gives me nothing but himself, who
Calls me in his private hours
By no name …

Words can be a 'nuisance', a distraction. In 'Substitute' they are a filling, and suggest discord:

Our bodies after love-making
Turned away, rejecting,
Our words began to sound
Like clatter of swords in fight.
In 'Convicts', words are submerged in the darkness of the passions, the music of the silence:

… We were earth under hot
Sun. There was a burning in our
Veins and the cool mountain nights did
Nothing to lessen heat. When he
And I were one, we were neither
Male nor female. There were no more
Words left, all words, lay imprisoned
In the ageing arms of night.

Kamala Das's preoccupation with the intensity of sexual love does not bring her to the brink of inarticulation. It is an unconscious irony perhaps that despite her frequent gestures of denial of power to words, despite her view that words are inadequate for love, her own affirmations of love are striking, eloquent, and concrete.

Judith Wright, on the other hand, believes that 'love takes no pains with words / but is most eloquent'. To love is to communicate and thus to feel divine; and to communicate is to feel creative. Language is an affirmation of the power of love. Words are necessary for interpreting one's passions: "I cannot know my heart's beauty /—say all the creatures—till you interpret me in god-made words." In 'Birds', the desire to escape into 'the forest of a bird' is an impassioned attempt to 'find the words that lie behind all these languages'. In 'Water', the simple perception of the movement of water can stimulate a perception of a profounder process:

Such sentences, such cadences of speech
the tonguing water stutters in its race
as may have set us talking each to each
before our language found its proper pace.

Concern with the relationship between language and creation is at the heart of 'Camping at Split Rock'. Each perception is an involvement within a word:

The finger of age-old water splits the rock
and makes us room to live: the age-old word
runs on in language and from obstinate dark
hollows us room for seeing.

And though 'the birds go by', 'we can name and hold them', for each of them is a 'word' that goes beyond the mortality of the bird. In 'Prayer', confronted with the thought of death herself, she prays that she retain love which includes the power 'to see the words', as well as the power to speak words:

And you, who speak in me when I speak well,
withdraw not your grace, leave me not dry and cold.
I have praised you in the pain of love, I would praise you still
in the slowing of the blood, the time when I grow old.

Judith Wright never gets breathless even when she is at her most intense in Woman to Man. In 'To Hafiz of Shiraz', she suggests that with the repetition of experience, there is corresponding simplification of words but that repetition and simplification need not mean the loss of intensity, for 'every word leads back to the blinding original Word'; there are no two ways for her, 'the way up and the way down', but one way only.

It is an unconscious irony in Judith Wright, one ventures to say, that she is concerned with words in the sense of a theme in poems which seem, on the whole, inferior to those in Woman and Man. The tone of most of
these poems is discursive, and although one notices the simplicity of the words one also misses in fact, the blinding light of the original Word. In Woman to Man, she does not seek to assert explicitly the power of words as she does, for example, in The Other Half, because, in the former, language is a mode of feeling and thus the power of words is felt in the power of the experience of love that she undergoes:

The burning wires of nerves, the crimson way from head to heart, the towering tree of blood—who travels here must move, not as he would, but fed and lit by love alone he may.

**Criticism: William H. Pritchard (essay date 1978)**


[In this review of Wright's retrospective collection The Double Tree, Pritchard notes an increasing flexibility in Wright's poetic tone, comparing her work to that of D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats.]

Judith Wright is an Australian poet, author of 10 books of verse from which the present selection [The Double Tree] has been made. Assuming that American readers need help with work that comes out of an unfamiliar country, she provides an introduction telling us a bit about Australia, of where she was born and brought up (the New England Country of New South Wales), and of her life during World War II and after, her founding of a society for wildlife conservation, her membership on a government committee of inquiry. It is an odd way to introduce one's poems, and in fact although I am unfamiliar enough with dingoes and wagtails, or with "the whipstick scrub on the Thirty-Mile Dry" (these occur in "Drought Year"), she surely overestimates the remoteness of her experience and materials. Especially since she writes in a forcefully direct manner, has no interest in obliquities or ambiguities of expression and finds English syntax fully adequate to her concerns.

These concerns are no less than typically human ones—observations about nature and human nature, birds and daughters, growing up and growing old, momentary discoveries that make a difference to the self:

Walking one lukewarm, lamp-black night I heard,
a yard from me his harsh rattle of warning,
and in a landing-net of torch-light saw him crouch—

...  

A bird with a broken breast. But what a stare  
he fronted me with!—his look abashed my own.  
He was all eyes, furious, meant to wound.  
And I, who meant to heal, took in my hand  
his depth of down, his air-light delicate bone,  
his heart in the last extreme of pain and fear.

If one thinks of D. H. Lawrence's "Birds, Beasts and Flowers," Judith Wright has the advantage in reality. She is wary about turning birds into symbols, at least until they have been established in their own birdlike identities; while the modest but subtle tone and pace of her lines build confidence in us rather than (as too often with Lawrence) alienating us by their exclamatory hysteria.

Her own voice—and readers of different temperament may not agree—is a high outer seriousness unrelieved, in the poems from the 1940's and 1950's, by inner humor. As with her introduction, her poems do not always avoid solemnity. A list of most-used words from the volume's first half would include "love," "eternity," "life," "star," "blood," "death," "seed," "flesh," "tree," "bird," "dream," "faith" and "night," a diction she shares
with Edwin Muir, whom she resembles in other ways. One is also conscious of Yeats in these earlier poems, but Judith Wright was reluctant or unable to dramatize an "I" with much individuality, so that when (in "Dream") she writes "O dying tree, I move beneath your shade," or "I sought upon the hill the crimson rose," the personal engagement feels minimal and the poetry rather conventional.

Somewhere around the mid-1960's her work grew more various, more flexible in tone, willing on occasion to eschew rhyme and exploit lines of irregular length. While not in themselves virtues, these practices may have helped move her in the direction of more pointedly personal reflection.

By the 1970's her poetic presence is a more inclusive one, able to say one thing and mean another, take on a dead metaphor and resuscitate it, as in "Black/White":

This time I shall recover
from my brief blowtorch fever,
The sweats of living
flood me; I wake again,
pondering the moves of anti and of pro.
Back into play I go.

Had it been pro-biotics they gave me
would I still live?
Anti-biotics maybe snub the truth
cheating the black King's
move—
emptily save me,
a counter-ghost tricked from a rightful death.

Off-rhymes, the witty invention of "pro-biotics" and of "blowtorch" as an adjective contribute to the generally sharp alterness and agility of this verse, which embodies the moves and "play" of its main metaphor:

But you can play on black squares or on white,
do without counters even; in theory
even the dead still influence what we do,
direct our strategy.
I'm none too sure exactly why I'm here,
which side I'm playing for—

Complicating itself, the poem risks confusion, then snaps back to pull itself together, its author unwilling to fall upon the thorns of life for very long:

But still here's day, here's night,
the checkerboard of yes and no
and take and give.
Again I meet you face to face,
which in itself is unexpected grace.
To arms, my waiting opposite—
we live.

A final, extra line, strong rhymes, a balanced readiness to resume: both serious and humorous, it shows this accomplished poet at her best.
Criticism: Alur Janakiram (essay date 1981)


[The following essay was delivered as a seminar in 1981. In this analysis, Janakiram examines and applauds Wright's struggle, in both poems and in life, to create a relationship "to be won by love only" between the European settlers of Australia, the Aborigine population and culture, and the land itself. Jankiram maintains that Wright uses this relationship to achieve a true Australian identity, not as an exile or a conqueror, but as a native at peace in her homeland.]

As Leonie Kramer has noted [in "Judith Wright, Hope, Mcauley," Literary Criterion, Vol. XV, Nos. 3–4, 1980], Judith Wright, A. D. Hope and James Mcauley form a major trinity, who together with R. D. FitzGerald, Douglas Stewart and David Campbell, "virtually wrote the history of Australian poetry" in the period after the world war II. "Their work represents", according to Kramer, "not so much a renaissance in Australian poetry as a first full flowering, which established poetry as a form able to challenge what had hitherto been the dominance of fiction." Whatever poetry is or may be, it has its springs in the human condition and reflects the personal and social aspirations of a particular milieu that produces it. The history of Australian poetry may be described, briefly, as the history of the white man's encounter with an alien landscape and alien tribes. The story of the white man's colonial adventure in Australia, a short one since it covers just three or four life-times, has been reflected in the Australian verse produced over the years and accounts for its peculiar pre-occupations with the landscape, the bush, the bushrangers and explorer-heroes. The dominance of the Romantic-Symbolist tradition in this poetry, with a greater share going to the Romantic component, can be explained by the fact that Australian poets, in their attempts to come to terms with their exiled consciousness in a "desolate country", found the Romantic mode quite handy for their purposes. As a result, nature or landscape receives much greater attention than the human figures and the images of light and dark, night and day, noises and silences persist frequently even in the poetry of the later period, and more so in the poetry of Judith Wright.

James Mcauley, Judith Wright's distinguished contemporary, has remarked about her poems that many of them "make high claims for themselves by the nature of their themes and language: they play for high stakes" [A Map of Australian Verse, 1975].

Her encounter with the natural environment and rural life is devoid of any urban bias; it is largely "meditative intuitive, emotional, with strong metaphysical searching." While a sense of immediacy and reflective intensity, coupled with a remarkable gift for image making, marks her earlier verse of the 40's and 50's, a movement towards the general and the abstract with a tendency to probe the metaphysical significance of experience has been noted by critics as a new development in her later poetry. "The surface change" in her poetry, as C. A. Wilkes puts it [in "The Later Poetry of Judith Wright," Southerly, A Review of Australian Literature, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1965], is that the main source of her poetic inspiration in her earlier period is the "finite world" available to the senses, while the effort of the later poetry is to reach beyond that world. However, there are a few themes that recur frequently both in her earlier and later verse; time as the moving image of eternity, the poet as the maker, love creativity and settlement, and the disappearance of the Aboriginal culture.

An effort is made in this paper to close-read a few of her poems dealing with the colonial experience of the white man in Australia particularly themes of colonisation, settlement and dispossession of the Aborigines. About four or five poems have been selected for a close examination for whatever light they may throw on the issue of colonial encounter.
The much anthologised piece, "Bullocky", that appeared first in *The Moving Image* (1946), as a familiar recreation of the Australian Dream in terms of the Biblical myth. The white man's colonising ventures in Australia recall the first settlement of the Jews in their Promised Land; the Bullocky man of the frontier days, thus, becomes a kind of "old Moses" and his "stubbourn team", the slaves that were led out of Egypt. Camping under the "half-light pillars of the trees" at night, the Bullocky man

filled the steeple cone of night
with shouted prayers and prophecies,

in order to overcome the terror of silence. The last two stanzas evoke the nature of the first colonial encounter with the vast bush and state how the pioneering ventures of the early settlers have transformed a desolate and intractable wild into "the promised Land" of the prophet Moses.

Grass is across the wagon-tracks,
and plough strikes bone across the grass,
and vineyards cover all the slopes
where the dead teams were used to pass.
O vine, grow close upon that bone
and hold it with your rooted hand.
The prophet Moses feeds the grape,
and fruitful is the Promised Land.

"Remittance Man", another poem of the same collection, concerns itself like "Bullocky", with the early white settlers. The remittance man was the "freak" who could never settle, who was content to go "tramping the backtracks" in summer haze and "let everything but life slip through his fingers." His easy-going habits led to his dis-inheritance and dismal end which are viewed in a matter-of-fact manner by his prosperous brother, the Squire.

That harsh biblical country of the scapegoat
closed its magnificence finally round his bones
polished by diligent ants. The squire his brother,
presuming death, signed over the documents, and
lifting his eyes across the inherited garden
let a vague pity blur the formal roses.

The well-known piece, "Nigger's Leap: New England", is unique for articulating a sharper sense of guilt, for offering a new perspective about the European adventure that has thrived at the expense of the primitive tribes of the land. Based on a particular incident of European reprisal, in 1844, in New South Wales, the poem recalls how the hapless Niggers, pursued to the top of the "Lipped cliff, "screamed falling in flesh" from those heights "and then were silent". The "bone and skull" lying securely under "the spine of range" and "the enveloping night call" for a "synthesis", for a revaluation of a historical relationship:

The sentiments recorded in these lines are a good example of what J. J. Healy [in "The Absolute and the Image of Man in Australian," *Awakened Conscience*, 1978] has termed as the "we-phenomenon", an expanded consciousness that acknowledges collective responsibility for a particular event of history, that sees the victim as a segment of the self-inflicted wound. Hence the call for "synthesis", for undoing a past injury.

It is interesting to note that Judith Wright's poetic mode of communication in all the poems dealing with the themes of settlement and usurpation is characterised by nature imagery of grass, rock, sea and dust. We have already seen how "Bullocky" [states its meaning] in terms of this basic imagery; here again, in ["Nigger's Leap: New England"], earth, wind and saplings play their own part in conveying what needs to be conveyed.
Never from earth again the coolamon,
or thin black children dancing like the shadows
of saplings in the wind… …
Night floods us suddenly as history,
that has sunk many islands in its good time.

Similar concerns of shared guilt that colonial encounter has entailed also inform, at a much deeper level, the long poem, "The Blind Man", originally published in the Woman to Man series (1949).

The issue of the white man's relationship with the land and its tribes is presented symbolically in the wider perspective of the dance of dust. And the dance of the "pollen-coloured dust" is none other than the eternal dance of birth and death. Jimmy Delaney, the blind man who sings under the Moreton Bay fig, "speaks in the voice of the forgotten dust". And his song carries much authenticity as a faithful narrative of the colonial venture since he himself, "is of that dust three generations made". The account begins with the pioneering efforts of the first generation Horrie Delaney who arrived at the place with his cattle and "shook the dust out of its golden sleep". However, he too had to shuffle across like "another shadow between the earth and the sun", and his adventure has culminated in being one with the tribes below the ground.

Deeper than the shadows of trees and tribes, deep
lay the spring that issues in death and birth.
Horrie Delaney with his dogs and his gun
came like another shadow between the earth and the sun
and now with the tribes he is gone down in death.

Then is recounted the venture of the second generation pioneer, Dick Delaney the combo, who cleared the hills and the bush finally for human settlement by dint of his sweat and labour:

Easily the bush fell and lightly, now it seems
to us who forget the sweat of Dick Delaney,
and the humpy and the scalding sunlight and the black
hate between the white skin and the black.

There is an important suggestion here that the adventure of the white man has both sides to it: the black hate involving the racial tension and the hard labour and sweat of the white man. It may be that both the labour and the hate lie hidden under the "marred earth" and its humble dust. However, whatever the outcome of the metamorphosis that has come over the pioneers, the vanquished tribe and the descendents of both, the dust has been performing its impersonal functions by keeping up the inexorable dance pattern of birth and death, growth and decay, in successive generations:

Dance upright in the wind, dry-voiced and humble dust
out of whose breast the great green fig-tree springs,
and the proud man, and the singer, and the outcast.

Admittedly, the colonial encounter, as presented in this poem, is not a simple tale of "came, saw and conquered"; it has wider ramifications of another kind of dance that the whirligig of time weaves in terms of dust, light and wind. This dance, assuming the pattern of generation, once sustained the green fig tree, the conqueror-dreamer and the dispossessed tribe. Assuming another form of negation and decay, the same dance has whittled them all into "shadows between the earth and the sun", into golden dust "driven by a restless wind":

66
The conqueror who possessed a world alone,
and he who hammered a world on his heart's stone,
and last the man whose world splintered in fear
their shadows lengthen in the light of noon,
their dust bites deep, driven by a restless wind.

The metaphysical overtones of this long narrative, of a blind singer's version of the Australian colonial experience, become clear and more pronounced as the account reaches its close. The speaker proclaims apocryphally with an assurance that is the outcome of an intent listening to the voices of the dark:

One feels constrained to ask the inevitable question: who are the two rulers of the world, the dreamer-explorer or the dispossessed tribal cherishing his own vanished dream? Clearly, the answer is in favour of the primeval elemental forces of birth and death, rather than the puny man. Perhaps, conquest, dispossession and defeat are altogether non-issues when they are placed in the wider perspective of decay and death, generation and degeneration—a pattern that the golden earth never tires of repeating at whatever level. This seems to be the note on which the blindman's song concludes: (that the "unregarded dust" is the ultimate conqueror).

Another longer piece, "Seven Songs for a Journey", belonging to The Two Fires (1955) series of poems, has a bearing on the colonial theme of settlement and adaptation under discussion in this paper. Here again, the core of the experience is presented symbolically through the basic and primary images of nature: this time of cliffs and creeks, moon and bone, sea-tides and mountain rocks. At the outset, the poet offers her song as a humble garland of word and phrase to the ageless rock and water of Carnarvon ranges and Creek. The song at once strikes us with its forceful bumping short rhythms of the Australian bushballad:

Carnarvon Creek
and cliffs of Carnarvon,
your tribes are silent;
I will sing for you—
each phrase
the size of a stone—
a red stone,
a white stone,
a grey,
and a purple;
... ... 
each word a sign
to set on your cliffs,
each phrase a stone
to lie in your waters.

All that the poet would ask in exchange from the cliffs are the "white orchard" from her slope and a fish from her waters.

The second section, "Brigalow Country", presents the tribal girl Margery as dancing "awkward as an emu" under the "metal-blue moon", with only the brigalow scrub on the slope and the far-off singing Dingoes to give her company. Her abject condition as a poor dweller of a fringecommunity is reflected in her bemoaning song she sings while dancing under the moon. The burden of her lament is that she has neither money nor sympathy and is as unregarded as the brigalow scrub on the slope, a silent companion in distress;
Living lost and lonely
with the tribe of the brigalows,
don't want to stay
but never can go.
Never get no money
for when I go hungry,
ever get no kisses
for when I feel sad—
rooted like the brigalows
until I'm dead …
And the tribe of the brigalows
drop their shadows
like still black water
and watch her there

The third section addresses itself to Night, a favourite image and preoccupation of Judith Wright. The contours of Night, like the contours of Carnarvon mountain rock, have endured as lasting onlookers on the scene although these contours have been occasionally eroded by the moon's pale creek and the "floods of sunlight" and water. Night here emerges as the emblem of the mysterious dark, the unknowable, that somehow keeps up the phenomenal dance and negates all our dreams, including the "earth"s:

Night is what remains
when the equation is finished.
Night is the earth's dream
that the sun is dead.
Night is man's dream
that he has invented God—
the dream of before-creation;
the dream of falling.
Night blocks our way, saying
I at least am real.

The 4th section "The Prospector" takes up the theme of settlement and colonial history and the attendant displacement and injury they have caused in the bargain. Burdened by the uneasy awareness that she is an intruder on this scene, the poet watches the moon rise in her full splendour

on the range where no bird's speaking
except in the crow's voice—
on the land to be won by love only;

The awareness that the desolate landscape, in order to be one with the inner landscape, requires the mediation of love also includes the other knowledge concerning the aspirations of the old skeletons and bones dreaming on under the bright white moon:

Rise up and walk, old skeleton
But no; lie still.
Let no phase of the moon disturb you,
no heats recall.
Let the bones dream on, the kind dream
that was their last—
dream the mirage's river
has quenched the world's thirst.

It is with such a heavy and burdened heart that the poet realises what her own place is vis-a-vis the landscape and the scene:

Full moon's too bright for sleeping—
too white the sky.
And foreign to this country
restless I lie.
But you, moon, you're no stranger;
You're known here, moon,
drawing your mad hands over
rock, dust and bone.

It is not just the rock, dust, bone and moon that stand out as "witnesses against our lives" and as onlookers of recent history, for they have been "initialled by clumsy knives". But the sea, "anonymous pilgrim", "free of time and space" and history, carries no memory or any mark except the "unshaped bone and the splinter of raft". This is indeed a strange inference, for we know that the sea which has made its own contribution to the discovery and formation of Australian geography and history, cannot be relegated to a background figure as free of time and space. Perhaps, the poet's implication seems to be that the sea bears no concrete traces of human history except that it transforms and cleans whatever it receives from the human side.

At the end of this remarkable song for the human journey under debate, the only witnesses to the human aspirations and achievements that the poet has presented, are the tall Carnarvon cliffs and shallow creeks.—Unlike the sea, the solitary mountain, emerging finally as a "tall", sad "figure in an estranged landscape, drawing her biblical blue cloak across her shoulders," is presented as a mother figure, "virgin and widow", weeping her small pools of tears and with nothing "left for her to dream on". She at least seems to be a participator in human history, if not the neutral sea.

"At Cooloola", a short poem, is of a piece with the two long poems discussed here as far as its central preoccupation with the antinomies of antipodean exile is concerned. The operative symbols in this short poem are: the blue crane, the white swan, the clean sand and the drift-wood spear. Oppressed by "arrogant guilt" of usurpation which, as Judith Wright remarks in one of her published lectures, is a sore on the Australian's relationship with the land, she observes in her wanderings near Cooloola how the ancient "blue crane" has been fishing down the centuries with a calm and assurance denied to herself. She is aware that

He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colours till he dies.

The outward scene turns the poet's attention inward, to an examination of her own relationship with the environment:

I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake
being unloved by all my eyes delight in
and made uneasy for an old murder's sake.

The third section of the poem glances backward at the mysterious beckoning which her grandfather received ninety years earlier from a ghostly black warrior. The past incident of crime and racial tension casts its gloom over the poet's present self-critical awareness. White shores of sand, says the poet, do "clear heavenly levels for the crane and swan" but not for her, smarting as she is under the burden of memory:
I know that we are justified only by love,
but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.
And walking on clean sand among the prints
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear
thrust from water; and, like my grandfather,
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

The solution to the moral dilemma presented in the poem is the time-honoured one: that any meaningful relationship with the land of one's exile or conquest, and its earlier inhabitants, has to be based on love and understanding, the positives of human existence, rather than fear and hatred that are self-negating. Love, a redeeming experience, forms the basic link in any relationship between man and man, either black or white, or man and nature. And much of Judith Wright's poetry has this insistent theme: that love alone is the "dark gift" that helps man sustain not only his human creativity and identity but his inward peace as well. Perhaps, the opening piece of the *Five Senses*, "The Company of Lovers" (1946) provides a clue to the chief direction the metaphysical quest the poet has taken in her later verse:

we, the lost company,
take hands together in the night,
forget the night in our brief happiness, silently.
We, who sought many things, throw all away
for this one thing, one only,
remembering that in the narrow grave
we shall be lonely.

To sum up, the colonial encounter in Judith Wright's poetry may be said to take the form of a quest for a genuine Australian identity, an identity that has rid itself of an adolescent nostalgia and emotional hankering for its ancestral home and tried to overcome the hampering effects of an exile consciousness. This quest, as in much of Australian poetry, has meant an imaginative effort to integrate the outer landscape, together with its trees and tribes, with a coherent and fulsome inner landscape, something wholly lived with rather than only observed from outside. In other words, the effort has meant a metamorphosis of a shipwrecked state into a situation of being really "at home”—of the kind described in James McAuley's beautiful little piece, "Terra Australis"

It is your land of similes: the wattle
Scatters its pollen on the doubting heart;
The flowers are wide awake; the air gives ease
There you come home….

*[The Penguin Book of Australian Verse, 1961]*

This attitude towards the land "to be won by love only", as Judith Wright reminds us repeatedly, also partakes of an imaginative concern for the Aboriginals and their ancient culture, of a desire to strike a meaningful relationship with them in place of the earlier one based on "arrogant guilt." It is a measure of Judith Wright's integrity as poet and crusader for certain human values that she has voiced this concern not only in the few poems discussed in this paper but even in her two published lectures: "Aboriginals in Australian Poetry" and "The Voice of the Aboriginals" [published in *Because I was Invited*, 1975].

The first lecture, delivered in 1971 in Sydney, takes stock of the attitudes in Australian poetry towards the tribal people and goes on to assess the impact of the encounter with a primitive culture on the Australian imagination. A salutary fallout of the Jindiworobak movement, she notes, has been the birth of a rather belated recognition that "the long despised people had a value in themselves" and that their culture, based on complex but close ritualistic links with the land, had something to give to the whites and the wider world. She further
notes that "the old attitudes of contempt and silence have been seriously undermined by the increasing publication of studies of Aboriginal culture and the Aboriginal plight." In the second lecture, "The Voice of the Aboriginals", delivered at East-West Centre in Honolulu in 1974, she attempts a critical assessment of the Aboriginal protest and creative writing in English and shows how the process of the liberation of the Australian imagination from its earlier smugness and guilty silences has been further activated by the voices of the Aboriginal writers and thinkers themselves—Kath Walker, Davis, Gilbert, Johnson and the rest. Her genuine concern for the tribal culture deserves to be placed in the context of her wider and shared concern for the welfare of our planet, very much threatened by, what she calls, modern scientism and the predatory economic exploitation of our environment by our overgrown technological civilisation; and this concern is effectively voiced in all her writings on the Conservation Movement of which she herself has been an active campaigner. That her concern for the tribal people has been sincere and large-hearted is self-evident in the estimate she offers of the impact of the Aboriginal writers:

… Voices such as theirs can help to convince us that Aboriginals are capable of weighing their own choices, deciding their own problems and living successfully in their own way, if not in ours. If they are emerging at last, whether to accuse us, to demand a new respect and consideration, or to tell us their own stories, it is certainly none too early. The tragedy might rather be that it is, perhaps, too late.

Criticism: Shirley Walker (essay date 1991)


[In this excerpt, Walker argues that Wright's collections Fourth Quarter and Phantom Dwelling represent a growth in the poet's already estimable talent and vision. Walker contends that in these books Wright brings a variety of new influences and insights to bear on old themes, answering with clarity questions left open by old poems, and finding peace through reconciliation where once she found conflict.]

The poems of Fourth Quarter represent a break-through into a newer and more vigorous poetic world; an expression of that acceptance which [the poem] "Shadow" anticipated, but which the poems of Alive did not quite achieve. This is one of the most thematically unified of Wright's volumes, for the collection as a whole is a celebration of the feminine principle, of intuition, imagination, love and creativity. The central symbol is the moon in its different phases and various aspects, for the moon controls the ebb and flow of the tide, the mysterious cycles of the feminine, and the "salt blood" of humanity which betrays its marine origin. The sublunary world is the world of physical change and flux, and in these poems Wright reaffirms her earlier commitment to it. Moreover the moon, as muse, inspires the imaginative and creative power of the unconscious which, according to Jung, is feminine in essence. In these poems the emphasis is upon psychic rather than physical creativity, and the source of psychic power, the unconscious, is symbolised by sleep, dream and water. Water and the sea image the source of and the ebb and flow of creativity. All aspects of creativity, such as the vision of Walter Burley Griffin, the architect of Canberra, are related to this generative compulsion. Subsidiary symbolic motifs such as the owl and the hare (creatures traditionally associated with the moon), the platypus, the whale and the termite queen, are brought into play to amplify the conception, and to expand its reverberations out to the furthest horizons of feeling, intuition, meditation, and vision.

In opposition to creativity Wright sets the concept of rationalism, which is symbolised by the daylight world, the land and the active male principle. There is a significant change in Wright's attitude towards evil which is no longer an inherent human characteristic, but a consequence of rationalistic ways of thought. In "White Night" (Alive) she posed a question which has been a constant preoccupation throughout her poetry: "Where does it all begin? / If evil has a beginning / it may disclose its meaning." The poems of Fourth Quarter
provide her answer. Here evil is not condoned, but is placed in perspective as the inevitable consequence of that split in the sensibility, the dissociation of thought and feeling … and the denial of human values which this involves. The consequences of rationalism are, once again, taken to their furthest limits. They apply not only to the physical world but to the human mind. The sludge and detritus of modern civilisation has silted up and choked not only the pure streams of the natural world, from Cedar Creek to the Kamo, but the well-springs of the unconscious. Yet nature will not be spoiled, nor will the creative power of the psyche ever be completely suppressed. This is the point of "Platypus" where the platypus is both itself and the elusive poetic impulse which is threatened by the ugly consequences of a polluted world and rationalistic thought:

Platypus, wary paradox,  
ancient of beasts,  
like a strange word rising  
through the waterhole's rocks,

you're gone. That once bright water  
won't hold you now.  
No quicksilver bubble-trail  
in that scummy fetor …

Yet when conditions are right ("At midnight and alone / there's a stir in my mind") the streams run clear, and the paradoxical image, half memory and half symbol, rises up through the "scummy fetor" which threatens to block it:

suddenly my mind  
runs clear and you rise through …  
platypus, paradox—  
like the ripples of your wake.

Within this dialectical framework—the creative feminine principle as opposed to the rationalistic will to power—the keynote of the poetry is acceptance. Wright is no longer interested in philosophical or linguistic rationalisations of inadequacy, for her own shortcomings are freely conceded, placed in perspective, and accepted as simply a reflection of and a parallel to the waning moon and the ebbing tide. The poet accepts her decline, projects herself into the tragi-comic figures of age and sibylline power—the "hag" and "witch" of "Easter Moon and Owl"—and defies the moon's advice to "throw it in", for her response to nature is still powerful, still sensuous.

In the "Interface" sequence, the dualism of human nature, the "schizophrenic imbalance" which has always disturbed Wright, is seen as a logical consequence of evolution. Having left the mother element, water, the human being is now a creature of both the sea (intuition and emotion) and the land (the intellect). The opposition of unconscious and conscious states is symbolised throughout the volume by sleep (or dream) and waking, sea and land. Mist and sea signify a dimension to which the individual has access only in sleep or the dream-life of the imagination:

Dreams: waves. Their wind-meandering changes  
reach to the edge of shore, no further.  
Their soft admonishing voices  
sound from a sea where we can swim no longer.  
Now we must wake.

In "Half-dream" the poet, like the old boat, is moored to the land by a fraying rope, drawn by the ebb and flow of the water and the moon-road. The poem also suggests the unity of the mind with the creatures of night and
water, and the inevitability of the final drift out towards darkness and death. "Dream" is far more vigorous than "Half-dream"; it suggests that the unconscious expresses the truth of life far more accurately than the waking mind, which deals in comfortable rationalisations. Indeed the individual can have access to truth only in states of dream, intuition and vision, for the evolutionary process has betrayed the human race, "unfinned", to the daytime rational life ashore. Because of its essentially dualistic or amphibian nature, there is no hope for humanity which, according to the poem "By-pass", is now on the highroad which is sweeping it into a world of increasing violence, with the chance for a "U Turn" missed forever. Modern men and women are the products of the age of violent and contending forces which Wright celebrates in "For the Quaternary Age". In this poem, however, Wright not only accepts her dualistic nature, but delights in it:

Part of this acceptance is the acceptance of love. "Eve Sings", a magnificent love lyric, is informed and strengthened by its acceptance of the imperfection of love. The keyword is "human" and its full implications are suggested by the old Edenic symbols: the serpent, the crossed swords, Eden, the tree and a doomed world. Against the full knowledge of guilt, failure and betrayal the poet sets the "greed and joy" of love, for:

In "Eve Scolds" the implications of being "human" are further developed, for the individual woman, Eve and mother earth are identified and opposed to the active, rapacious male principle, "so entrepreneurial, vulgarly moreish, / plunging on and exploring where there's nothing / left to explore, exhausting the last of our flesh". The two impulses—creative (female) and imperialistic (male)—are clearly incompatible:

But you and I, at heart, never got on.
Each of us wants to own—
You, to own me, but even more, the world;
I, to own you.

As always the female impulse is to surrender: "I go over-board for you, / here at the world's last edge. / Ravage us still; the very last green's our kiss." The witty colloquialisms—"I go overboard" and "the world's last edge"—suggest that, because of love, the surrender to male domination is inevitable. Acceptance of this breeds detachment and the poem's irony is light and humorous, in keeping with the title.

Age is more difficult to accept, and the narcissistic young woman in the orchard in "Woman in Orchard" (Eve again?) who "kneels / to love her body in the pool / and dream herself for ever young" confronts instead her alter ego, herself grown old, the witch who "steals / not the flesh but the joy of it". "Moving South", a poem which deals with Wright's move from Mount Tamborine to Braidwood in New South Wales, is more serious and less complex, for moving south, closer to the pole, is a metaphor for divesting oneself of the fleshly extravagance of "summer" existence—an extravagance which is, after all, a cheating enchantment (Beauté de diable)—in order to approach the essence of experience; not only the "root's endurance" which the poet has been stressing throughout her work, but also the waiting winter and death.

In Fourth Quarter Wright returns to old themes with a new vigour and often in a completely new context, always demonstrating control, detachment and a mastery of her material. In "The Dark Ones", for instance, the Aborigines are identified with the dark and potent contents of the unconscious. They rise up like wraiths to reproach the confidence and assurance of the daylight world:

In the town on pension day
mute shadows glide.
The white talk dies away
the faces turn aside.

A shudder like breath caught
runs through the town.
Are *they* still here? We thought …
Let us alone.

The Aborigines are the shadow side of the self; to deny them is the same as denying a part of the self:

The night ghosts of a land
only by day possessed
come haunting into the mind
like a shadow cast.

Like the Jungian shadow, the Aborigines must be brought up into the consciousness and accepted before the shame and guilt of the white race can be healed. This is a significant and moving poem; quite as powerful as the early "Bora Ring" and "Nigger's Leap, New England", for it relates the immediate racial problem to the deepest levels of the psyche, of feeling and intuition, repressed guilt and shame which, like the "dark ones" of the poem, is denied at our own risk.

"Boundaries" returns to the problem of the relationship between the mind and the world with a new confidence in the ability of the imagination to "first distinguish, then forget distinction; / record the many, then rejoin the all". The imagination is able to see the "whole flow" in the particular, despite the categories of mind (such as language) which insist upon limit, form and time. The imagination can not only re-create the totality from the constituent portion—"I've seen a hat / build under itself a person long since dead"—but, given a stimulus, can create the totality for itself:

That lock of wild bronze hair
that Byron cut from a girl's head
sprang under my touch alive with the whole girl.

The important thing here is that the power of the imagination is affirmed in the face of the limitations which language imposes upon it, and "Boundaries" is an answer to that series of poems which deals with epistemological breakdown resulting from the breakdown of language.

There are in this volume and in *Phantom Dwelling* a number of poems which appear on first sight to be simply descriptive of nature, examples of that reverence for nature and concern for its uniqueness which the poet has always advocated. These poems are, however, a new departure for, by imitative form and subtle modulations in linguistic texture, the poet captures the visual, tactile and even the kinetic quality of the subject. In this way Wright avoids, as far as possible, the propensity of language and symbolism to humanise nature. Instead she attempts, by imitative form, to capture the individuality of the natural form and so to preserve its autonomy. For instance the long and flexible, broken yet springy rhythms of "The Eucalypt and the National Character" effectively imitate the "sprawling and informal; / even dishevelled, disorderly" landscape:

Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,
she leaves herself plenty of margin. Nothing is stiff,
symmetrical, indispensable. Everything bends
whip-supple, pivoting, loose …

In "Case-moth", too, the texture of the language captures the visual form, the movement and the life-quality of this particular organism:

Homespun, homewoven pod,
case-moth wears a clever web.
Sloth-grey, slug-slow,
slung safe in a sad-coloured sack,
a twig-camouflaged bedsock,
shifts from leaf to next leaf;
lips life at a bag mouth.

"Swamp Plant" and "Encounter" are similarly impressive. At the same time these poems achieve Ponge's "invasion of qualities", "Case-moth", for instance, conveys the tenacity of life and the cautious subterfuges required for survival, and suggests that such caution stunts the life of the moth ("Inside, your wings wither") and, by extension to the human sphere, the life of the imagination. The termite queen too is seen on a naturalistic level, yet becomes a superb indigenous symbol for the generative feminine principle, in this way tying the poem to the central theme of the volume:

She is nursery, granary, industry,
army and agriculture.
Her swollen motionless tissues
rule every tentacle.

The predatory echidna symbolises the threat to the dark generative world of nature and the unconscious by the daylight forces of philistinism and rationalism. Here the reservations expressed earlier about the symbolism of some of the poems of The Gateway and later volumes are answered in full, for the indigenous creatures—whale, platypus, termite queen and echidna—are transmuted into resonant symbols, yet their own character is not betrayed. The balance between inner and outer is exquisite, particularly in the case of the platypus; while the whale, the water-inhabiting, air-breathing mammal, becomes a wholly appropriate symbol for the dissociated psyche. Throughout Fourth Quarter symbolism is a finely integrated structural feature, exemplified not only by the basic symbolic dualisms which dominate the volume (darkness and light, water and land, dream and waking), but by the symbolism of individual poems. Wright's detachment, control and surer touch are also demonstrated in the tighter structure of these poems. Verse forms are more regular, and almost imperceptible patterns of rhyme, half-rhyme and assonance give a new sense of structure and tension to the poetry. There is a new vigour too, born of the poet's greater sense of assurance and control. This confidence is demonstrated in a number of ways: there is a wide-ranging allusiveness, a new use of wit and word-play, and an assured use of colloquialisms, often with a double meaning. "Lover, we've made, between us, / one hell of a world" ("Eve Scolds"), for instance, is suitably chilling, both in the Edenic context and the context of conservation; while "you may yet grin last" ("Easter Moon and Owl") suggests not only the visual form of the moon, but the durability of poetry and the imagination—"He who laughs last laughs longest".

Irony and humour are a feature of this volume, and a number of Wright's serious preoccupations are satirised. In "At Cedar Creek", for instance, she seeks a "formula" for poetry in a satiric "schema" which parodies her previous concern with culture, nature, primitivism and myth; the conscious and the unconscious:

Complex ritual connections
between Culture and Nature
are demonstrated by linguistic studies.
The myths of primitive people
can reveal codes
we may interpret …

Religions suppress the decays of time
and relate the Conscious
to the Unconscious (collective).
Metaphorical apprehensions
of the relations of deities, men and animals
can be set out in this schema.

"Creation-Annihilation" treats the previously sacred creative act with irreverent irony. Creation is no longer
the linguistic feat of humanity, but the work of a jubilant and playful God who, with untidy gusto, scatters his
"mudscraps and sparks of light" everywhere to the bewilderment of man:

Motes from his hand's delight
crowded earth, water, air,
too small, it seemed, for care;
too small for Adam's eye
when all the names began.
None of the words of man
reached lower than the Fly.

The importance of Anthony van Leeuwenhoek in the context of this poem and this volume is not only that he
discovered minute forms of life such as bacteria, previously un-named and so considered not to exist, but that
he established the basic unity on the level of sexual generation of humans, fleas, weevils and other "scraps and
huslement[s]" of the Creation—hence Man's insecurity; he is no longer "Favourite Child"! In its wit, sheer
energy and virtousity, this poem is quite different from anything previous to it. Versatility is displayed to a
lesser extent in other poems of Fourth Quarter such as "Counting in Sevens" which has the surface simplicity
of a child's counting rhyme, yet is a moving recapitulation of the poet's emotional life-story. Indeed the whole
volume is characterised by vigour, assurance and a mastery of her medium; all of which stem from acceptance
and a subsequent liberation from fear.

The publication of Phantom Dwelling, nine years after Fourth Quarter, is a striking testament to Wright's
continuing vitality and poetic skill. The most obvious aspect of this volume is its energy and versatility, and it
is not surprising that the dominant imagery is that of fire. At the same time its mood is relaxed, laconic and
even playful. The feminine sensuality of the earlier poetry is still there, not only in the attraction to and love of
nature, and in the sensuous images in which nature is celebrated, but also in the constant evocation of warmth,
red wine and love—all of which have a positive affinity with fire.

Many of its themes are familiar: Wright's obsession with nature, love and language is as strong as ever, but
modulated and strengthened by tolerance and detachment, the quality for which she prayed in the much earlier
"Request to a Year". When love is mentioned, it is either in defiance of the autumnal season of the poems, or
in delight at love's recurrence: "Blood slows, thickens, silts—yet when I saw you / once again, what a joy set
this pulse jumping" ("Pressures"). Wright's obsession with nature is as strong as ever but here, more than in
any preceding volume, she concedes the essential "otherness" of nature and the impossibility, as she puts it in
"Rainforest", of entering the "dream", the world of the creatures. Wright has also come to terms with her
family, the pastoral way of life, and her New England heritage. These are treated realistically yet
compassionately in "For a Pastoral Family". Myth and language are still seen as related human constructs, the
powerful and traditional symbolic forms through which humanity creates its visions of reality, and there is
more attention to these than in either Alive or Fourth Quarter. Yet, at the same time, both myth and language
are treated in a relaxed and often humorous manner. The local exponent of myth, the poet Christopher
Brennan, is given especially tender treatment. The poem "Brennan" is not only an elegy for that incongruous
and flawed figure, seen as a "black leaf blowing / in a wind of the wrong hemisphere", but also for the loss of
all tradition in a world where "History's burning garbage / of myths searches / sends up its smoke-wreath /
from the city dump".

In the poems of Phantom Dwelling there is a wide and eclectic reference, often to Eastern thought, myth and
poetry, and the latter is envied for its brevity and clarity of its images. Where the influence of Eliot's diction
and imagery was marked (and often damaging) in a number of the early poems, leading at times to stereotyped wasteland images and prosaic diction, the influence of Eastern poets, as well as the more familiar Wallace Stevens and Yeats, is obvious in this volume. One is reminded of Yeats in particular, not only by a number of direct references, but by the relaxation of tone and diction, and the obvious power and energy which spring in old age from the forgiveness of self and others.

In "Brevity", the first poem in "Notes at Edge" ("Edge" is Wright's home within the Mongarlowe Wildlife Reserve), Wright seeks a minimalist poetic—one of "honed brevities" and "inclusive silences", of "few words" and "no rhetoric", of the economy and elegance of the haiku. The poems which follow are the equivalent of botanical sketches; they capture with an almost scientific exactitude the appearance, form, shape and behaviour of an organism or a natural feature, subjected to the intent gaze of the solitary poet. She observes and records the hills in summer "where a eucalyptine vapour / dreams up in windless air"; the dead kangaroo-doe, a "slender skeleton / tumbled above the water with her long shanks / cleaned white as moonlight"; the caddis fly, a "small twilight helicoter", and the fox, that "rufous canterer". The poem "Fox" in particular is a triumph of aural as well as visual effects as it mimics the sound as well as tracing the path of the fox's escape: "running like a flame. / Against storm-black Budawang / a bushfire bristle of brush. / Under the candlebark trees / a rustle in dry litter." These spare, honed images have the greater impact because of the brevity of the poems; they are "enclosed by silence / as is the thrush's song" ("Brevity").

The most striking innovation in the volume is the sequence "The Shadow of Fire", twelve poems identified as ghazals which indicate the power and variability of Wright's poetic at this time. The extended flexible lines, the unrhymed couplets, the variable and even jaunty rhythm, are perfectly suited to both the sensuality which is characteristic of the ghazal, and the philosophical and metaphysical questioning which has always been a feature of Wright's work. Within these structures she is able to make a laconic comment such as "My generation is dying, after long lives / swung from war to depression to war to fatness" with the matter-of-fact detachment which suits the theme of this poem "Rockpool". Individual couplets have the compression, the clarity and the brilliance of haiku, for instance the lines in "Memory" which suggest love in declining years:

Now only two dragonflies dance on the narrowed water.
The river's noise in the stones is a sunken song.

Concluding couplets, with their assurance and sense of finality, encapsulate the concerns of the poem. The concluding couplet of "Rockpool", for instance, sums up that conflict between nature and the individual which has been one of Wright's lifelong obsessions:

the stretching of toothed claws to food, the breeding
on the ocean's edge. 'Accept it? Gad, madam, you had better.'

and, at the same time, dismiss it in a humorous and decisive way.

Though each poem can stand independently, the sequence read as a whole forms a meditation on life itself from the point of view of serene old age. The first ghazal "Rockpool" is concerned with the violence, the conflict, the "devouring and mating", which are the essence of physical life and which are to be observed most clearly in the microcosm of the pool:

I watch the claws in the rockpool; the scuttle, the crouch—
green humps, the biggest barnacled, eaten by seaworms.
In comes the biggest wave, the irresistible
clean wash and backswirl. Where have the dead gone?
In the context of the relentless flux of nature, and the power and impersonality of the sea which is now the great cleanser as well as obliterator, the question "Where have the dead gone?" seems irrelevant. Wright's acceptance of violence and conflict is not, however, a passive or a flaccid thing; it comes from strength, from a perception of herself as a being of fire, a part of the conflict and energy of the universe ("who wants to be a mere onlooker? Every cell of me / has been pierced through by plunging intergalactic messages", "Connections"). There is the recognition that all life—physical, spiritual and emotional—is energy, and that the you and I of the ghazal "Winter" are part of it:

The paths that energy takes on its way to exhaustion are not to be forecast. These pathways, you and me,

followed unguessable routes. But all of us end at the same point, like the wood on the fire,

the wine in the belly. Let's drink to that point—like Hafiz.

The symbolism of the ghazals, that of fire, is appropriate in this context, and fire appears once again in all its volatility. It can be comfortable and domestic (the hearth, the radiator, the torch) or the "fireflies, glow-worms, fungal lights" which indicate the secret life of nature. But it can also be the fire of atomic explosion which signifies the human capacity for violence: "Brighter than a thousand suns"—that blinding glare / circled the world and settled in our bones." This progression is seen in the final ghazal, "Patterns", a meditation upon human evil where Wright returns to the old Herakleitean notion of cosmic balance, of the reconciliation of opposing principles:

All's fire, said Heraclitus; measures of it kindle as others fade. All changes yet all's one.

We are born of ethereal fire and we return there. Understand the Logos; reconcile opposing principles.

Perhaps the dark itself is the source of meaning, the fires of the galaxy its visible destruction …

Impossible to choose between absolutes, ultimates. Pure light, pure lightlessness cannot be perceived …

Still unable to come completely to terms with the evil symbolised by the strontium bomb—"Well, Greek, we have not found the road to virtue. / I shiver by the fire this winter day."—Wright is still prepared to assert that humanity is born of fire, of the energy and power of the cosmos, yet somehow inexplicably given to, "possessed by", darkness.

We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness.

The note of reconciliation and balance on which the ghazals, and the volume, conclude is also a feature of the earlier three sections—"New Zealand Poems," "Poems 1978–1980" and "Notes at Edge."

A number of the poems accept the impossibility of a complete identification with nature; of entering the consciousness of another form of life. This is the point of "Rainforest" from "Poems 1978–1980," an elegant lyric, moving and simple in its diction, imagery and emotional appeal. The poem is concerned with the "otherness" of nature, the way in which nature resists the "dividing eyes" of the human, which "measure, distinguish and are gone", and yet fail to understand the ecological unity and harmony of the rainforest where
"all is one and one is all".

The ghazal "Summer" is also concerned with the human inability to enter the consciousness of nature. Here the speaker contemplates the ruins of a mining settlement and seeks the "quality" of a place which was once human, which once "drank dark blood … heard cries and running of feet". The essence of the place is not its brief human history, marked now by "a tumble of chimney-stones / shafts near the river", but the efforts of the earth to heal itself, to rid itself of the damage of alien occupation. The business of the earth and its creatures goes on unaware of the human dimension, and unknowable to the human mind:

I'll never know its inhabitants. Evening torchlight
catches the moonstone eyes of big wolf-spiders.

All day the jenny-lizard dug hard ground
watching for shadows of hawk or kookaburra.

At evening, her pearl-eggs hidden, she raked back earth
over the tunnel, wearing a wide grey smile.

In a burned-out summer, I try to see without words
as they do. But I live through a web of language.

"Connections", another of the ghazals, treats the inability of the human mind to share the consciousness of nature with an irreverence which is characteristic of this volume: "I can smell the whitebeard heath when it's under my nose, / and that should be enough for someone who isn't a moth."

Despite this recognition of the "otherness" of nature, or perhaps because of it, the poems of this volume celebrate the earth with love; indeed no previous volume has been so concerned with nature for its own diversity, power and beauty, rather than in relation to humanity, or as a personal threat to the individual. The power of nature is now fearlessly acknowledged, in images which glory in its contending forces:

Deep down, the world-plates struggle
in strangling quiet on each other.
Offshore, deliberate breakers hit the coasts.
"From the Wellington Museum"

The progression of the seasons is likewise no longer seen as a mythic analogue for the human condition, but is celebrated for its own beauty and power. Detachment brings a cosmic rather than a human perspective, and in "Backyard" autumn is celebrated in an original, startling and completely appropriate image:

Autumn swings earth round sun
at the invisible lasso's end,
turning this latitude south and winterward.

From an ant's-eye view, as it were, Wright moves into closer focus to observe, with detached interest, the carrying out of earth's "ancient orders", as the Autumn season enacts the "shorthand" encoded in the seasonal change:

In last alchemic leaves held to the light,
in soundless bursts of seed,
in the tough satin of the spider's case
and the foam-plastic comb the mantis lays,
in branched green-copper-scaly spires of dock
the season's shorthand coils its final code;
This treeless trampled scrap of earth
fibrous with rot and weed
repeats its ancient orders. Use all death
to feed all life. The lockup of the frost
will melt, the codes translate with nothing lost.

There is complete assurance here, the assurance of the achieved vision which no longer fears the "ancient orders" of the earth, orders which are to "Use all death / to feed all life".

The compressed accuracy and appeal of the natural images in "Notes at Edge" is also a feature of the sequence "Four Poems from New Zealand," which captures the New Zealand landscape with unerring accuracy: a countryside of "Gorse, bracken, blackberries" which "scab over wounded ground"; of sheep which "eat, eat, eat and trot dementedly"; and of the beach at Hokitika:

A narrow shelf below the southern alps,
a slate-grey beach scattered with drifted wood
darkens the sullen jade
of Tasman's breakers. Blackbacked gulls
hunt the green turn of waves.

The sequence also captures another reality; that of a colonised nation whose history in many ways parallels that of Australia; the nation, like Wellington, is "built on a fault-line". Images of colonisation are everywhere: in the placenames, the country rituals, the Anglicised tea-shops, and the attitudes, for instance the negal-granite stance" of a "grizzled man, scotch-eyed, grey-overcoated". Despite the poem's acknowledgement of political realities, these images are presented without rancour. But behind the comfortable images of European settlement Wright perceives another reality, the dark spirit of the forest and the alien landscape of New Zealand—"a swoop of mountains, scope of snow / northward and southward. Jags, saw-teeth, blades of light / nobody could inhabit"—and this reality is Maori. The empathy of the Maori with the land is captured in Wright's image of the Maori genealogies in the Wellington museum:

Vine-spiralling Maori genealogies,
carved paths through forests
inscribed with life-forms, coded histories tangled my eyes
never quite able to meet that paua-stare.

The genealogies, the natural history and the traditions of the Maori are "coded", their essential meaning unavailable to the white observer who is "never quite able to meet that paua-stare". Wright is closest to Maori reality on the deserted beach at Hokitika where she contemplates the solitary figure of a Maori girl: "But for her smile, the beach is bare." The sequence concludes with an image of reconciliation, of the recognition and celebration of all struggle, of "being, itself. Being that's ground by glaciers, seas and time".

Three poems from "Poems 1978–1980"—"Smalltown Dance", "For a Pastoral Family" and "Words, Roses, Stars"—return to familiar themes and demonstrate Wright's continuing skill and versatility. The first of these is an elegant and accomplished poem which explores, as did a number of earlier poems, the metaphysical implications of humble domestic activity. The poem is concerned with the way in which the feminine spirit is enthralled, in bondage to an all too easy and often attractive domesticity. The smalltown dance of the title is that of women folding the sheets in an ancient ritual, and the poem begins with a particularly impressive image, that of the finding of the square-root of the sheet, the pulling on its diagonal to straighten the warp:
Two women find the square-root of a sheet.
This is an ancient dance:
arms wide: together: again: two forward steps: hands meet
your partner's once and twice.

The mathematical connotations of this image are appropriate to the programmed, ritualised dance of the women. As well, the pulling into shape against the warp could be symbolically significant not only for the sheets, but also for the women. The world enclosed by the sheets on washday is a world which is a loving and comforting one for the child: "Simpler than arms, they wrapped and comforted / clean corridors of hiding, roofed with blue." However, although the child has a sense of unlimited possibility symbolised by "that glimpse of unobstructed waiting green", the poem is full of images of female suppression. The image of the clean sheets, those "wallowing white dreamers" of the washday world, can also apply to the feminine psyche: "The sheets that tug / sometimes struggle from the peg, / don't travel far" and dreams must be surrendered to the constriction of the domestic cupboard:

First pull those wallowing white dreamers down,
spread arms: then close them. Fold
those beckoning roads to some impossible world …
That white expanse
reduces to a neat
compression fitting in the smallest space
a sheet can pack in on a cupboard shelf.

What is noticeable about the poem is the humorous and relaxed tone; the sustained imagery by which the humble washday provides a symbolic reference for female destiny; the return to imagery of the dance, the pattern of life itself; and the evocation, once again, of the paradisal world of the child in contrast to the ritualised repression of the adult world.

In the sequence "For a Pastoral Family" Wright returns to and revalues her New England heritage. With old age and the dropping of all pretence there is no longer a need to distance the pastoral world by romantic nostalgia as in "South of my Days", by castigation as in "Eroded Hills", or by mythologising as in "Falls Country". These earlier poems, fine in themselves, mark stages through which the poet has passed on her way to a human acceptance of all aspects of her heritage. This involves a direct confrontation with the issues of corruption, of self-interest, guilt and evasion on which the pastoral conquest was based and then sustained. The tone varies from ironic, to patronising, to sarcastic as the sequence satirises first of all an "arrogant clan" who were "fairly kind to horses / and to people not too different from ourselves", then the rationalisations of the past, in particular those concerning the massacre and dispersal of the Aborigines: "after all / the previous owners put up little fight, / did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human." Her own generation was protected by a "comforting cover of legality" for:

the really deplorable deeds
had happened out of our sight, allowing us innocence.
We were not born, or there was silence kept.

At the same time, despite this clear-sighted satire, the paradisal beauty of the pastoral life, the seasons, and the child's world is recognised. Nostalgia breaks through in "Kinship", which dwells lovingly upon memories of a sheltered childhood, the shared life of the children, Wright's two younger brothers and herself, now "two old men, one older woman", and the ties which persist between them, despite political and other differences:

Blue early mist in the valley. Apricots
bowing the orchard trees, flushed red with summer,
loading bronze-plaqued branches;
our teeth in those sweet buttock-curves. Remember
the horses swinging to the yards, the smell
of cattle, sweat and saddle-leather?
Blue ranges underlined the sky. In any weather
it was well, being young and simple,
letting the horses canter home together.

"Smalltown Dance" and "Kinship" are the latest, but perhaps not the final poems, in a series which deals with the paradisal world of the child and contrasts it with the corrupt world of the adult. "Change" uses the imagery of the mountain stream (from Yeats) to express the inevitability of corruption: "streams go / through settlement and town / darkened by chemical silt. / Dams hold and slow them down, / trade thickens them like guilt. / All men grow evil with trade / as all roads lead to the city." At the same time, in a gesture of balance and reconciliation which is characteristic of this volume, Wright recognises that the alternative, remaining in the cold purity of the hills, must result in ignorance.

The third of these poems is "Words, Roses, Stars", dedicated to the poet John Bechervaise, and perhaps the most assured of all that series of poems, from the fifties onward, in which Wright deals with the relationship between the world, the human mind and language. "Words, Roses, Stars" skilfully accommodates its philosophical complexity, and the subtle progression of its thought, within the lyric form. The address is direct, to "my friend" Bechervaise and to all of us, to "you, and you", who are under instruction as to the simplicity and absolute Tightness of philosophical concepts which were once handled in a ponderous and problematic way. The rose itself is a "swirl of atoms", an image which captures the shape and movement and physical composition of the bloom. But the rose is also a human construct, for it is "bodied in a word. / And words are human":

A rose, my friend, a rose—
and what's a rose?
A swirl of atoms bodied in a word.
And words are human; language comes and goes
with us, and lives among us. Not absurd
to think the human spans the Milky Way.

The second stanza recognises the beauty, the appeal and the validity of all three ways of looking at nature, through myth, through science, and through the language in which both myth and science are expressed. Myth is the "gift of life, the endless dream" and science is a visionary search for a "mathematical glory in the sky":

Baiame bends beside his crystal stream
shaded beneath his darker cypress-tree
and gives the gift of life, the endless dream,
to Koori people, and to you and me.
Astronomers and physicists compute
a mathematical glory in the sky.
But all these calculations, let's admit,
are filtered through a human brain and eye.

The knowledge that "words are human" is no longer a threat as it was in the earlier "The Lake" or "Nameless Flower", for "sight and touch and scent / join in that symbol" and "the word is true, / plucked by a path where human vision went". This is a significant reassertion of the power of vision. While there is a constant recognition in this volume that humans cannot "see without words" ("Summer") and that all vision is "filtered through a human brain and eye" the earlier defensiveness and fear is gone.
Reconciliation and balance are key concepts in these last poems and are expressed in finely balanced images which contain and reconcile opposing states such as old age and love:

fallen leaves on the current scarcely move
But the kingfisher flashes upriver still.
"Dust"

There are also overt statements of reconciliation like that which concludes Phantom Dwelling—"We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness"—perhaps the best example with which to conclude this study. There is, however, no real conclusion, for there is as yet no conclusion to Wright's work. What is obvious is the energy with which she continues to express her timeless obsessions with nature, love and language. It is as if old age had produced an alchemic change, ridding the poetry of the baser elements, the fear, defensiveness and the dwelling upon philosophical qualifications which inhibited many of the poems of her middle years. Her declaration, in the ghazal "Oppositions"—"I choose fire, not snow"—is more than justified.

**Wright, Judith (Poetry Criticism): Further Reading**

**Bibliography**


Primary and secondary bibliography extensively covering the years 1925 through 1979, and partially covering 1980. Critical material is subdivided into the following categories: books and theses, general articles, lectures and verse; shorter references; brief notes; and specific review.

**Biography**


Biographical consideration of Wright's poems and politics.

**Criticism**


Examines both Wright's poetry and prose to expose the "unifying principle of love … as the basis of a constructive and life-enhancing moral outlook."


Traces the recurring themes of conservation and ecological responsibility through the entire body of Wright's work.


Considers the attitudes Wright expresses in her writings toward Australia's Aborigines and white European settlers. Brennan concludes that those of Wright's poems that focus on the
tragic events of the past do so not with a tone of condemnation toward the pioneers, but with a sincere lament for the passing of the Aboriginal culture.


Echoes the widely held perception that Wright's The Gateway, is an inferior follow-up to her first two collections of poetry, placing at least some of the blame on the overzealous acclaim given to those earlier volumes; nonetheless, Buckley argues that her place in literature is secure.


Outlines the constant concern with duality and reconciliation of "the basic dichotomies of human existence" that dominates most of Wright's poetry.


Highlights the use of Old Testament imagery in Wright's earlier poems.


Strives for a fresh look at Wright's first four collections of poetry, asserting as many others do, that Wright's talent is made most evident in her first two collections.


Overview of Wright's career.


Attempts to place Wright, Hope, and McAuley within a modernist framework, while contrasting Wright's lack of "interior conflict" with the despair and "radical disquiet" of the other two poets.


Includes an introduction by McAuley, as well as excerpted commentary from other critics, and several of Wright's poems printed in full.


Compares Wright's use of her Australian background to Dylan Thomas's synthesis of his Welsh experiences.

Analysis of Wright's third book of poems. Moore asserts that the poet's desertion of metaphysical themes for social and personal ones is accompanied by a use of allegories in place of symbols she had earlier utilized.


Chronicles Wright's life and works through the mid-1960s.


An examination, in particular, of the tone of Wright's poetry.


Places Wright's work within the Romantic tradition of the "visionary poetry [of] Blake, Shelley and Yeats."


Contrasts the use of frontier imagery in Wright's poems with non-Australian literary frontier images, particularly of the American West.


Explores Wright's use of language, primarily as a symbolic tool to "fuse factual experience and its emotional significance."


Analysis of three of Wright's character poems.


Assesses the role of the writer as spokesperson for political and social causes.


Compares two of Australia's most popular native poets, centering specifically on their treatments of Eden as metaphor and attributing their different viewpoints and styles primarily to their difference in gender.
Interview


Discusses the particular aspects of Australian experience that have influenced her writing, including the verse of early Australian poets, issues surrounding the Aborigine's place in modern Australia, and the white's historical and current impact on Australia's historical and social landscape. Additionally, Wright touches on the particular problems she faces as a poet in contemporary Australia.

Additional coverage of Wright's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: Contemporary Authors, 13–16 (rev. ed.); Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Vol. 31; Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vols. 11, 53; Major 20th-century Writers; and Something about the Author, Vol. 14.