What are Writers for in a Destitute Time? Judith Wright and the Search for Australia

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My title refers to one of Heidegger’s essays, ‘What Are Poets For?’. It is not an important question for most of us in this country at the moment. But that, I suggest, is one of the many reasons why the second part of Heidegger’s question—in which he answers his question—rings true for me. We live in a destitute time, he says,

... not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable of their own mortality ... have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned.

But, he says, hope remains because there is language. ‘Song still lingers over [the] destitute land. The singer’s word still keeps to the trace of the holy.’

This is not the kind of language that appeals to most Australians. But what if the discovery of ‘the holy’, the mysterium tremendum et fascinans, some mystery at the heart of existence which fascinates us but makes us tremble, were the great neglected factor in European settlement of Australia? What if therefore the crucial task of people like us, newly come to a place hitherto unknown to them is its recognition—what Mircea Eliade called ‘the transformation of chaos into cosmos’? If this is so then the direction our history has been taking towards more and more material accumulation may be mistaken. From early in her career Judith Wright seems to have thought so, writing in ‘Dust’, for example, that

... Our dream was the wrong dream, our strength was the wrong strength ... and implying that there is a history more important for us as human beings than the imperial history—the history of conquest and domination—in which we put our trust. What was important was not possession but the kind of dispossession with which ‘The Harp And The King’, for instance, concludes:

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 of the soul.\textsuperscript{5}

This symbol, however, was not to be found within the self and its desires but
in the country itself and thence transform the self. Therefore she saw her task
as interpreting ‘the country’s history’. But it was not the history to be found in
books or official records but in the landscape, which for her was:

... full of a deep and urgent meaning ... These hills and plains, these rivers
and plants and animals were what I had to work with as a writer, and they
themselves contained the hidden depths of a past beyond anything that cities
and the history of British invasion had to offer.\textsuperscript{6}

They were, as she famously said, ‘part of [her] blood’s country’.\textsuperscript{7} But it is
important to reflect on what this actually means, that she has a sense of a
reality beyond the human self, what Levinas calls ‘there is’ which ‘transcends
inwardness as well as exteriority’.\textsuperscript{8} Wright herself put it more simply:

Most children I think are brought up in the ‘I’ tradition these days—the ego,
it’s me and what I think. But when you live in very close contact with a large
and splendid landscape as I did you feel a good deal smaller than just I.\textsuperscript{9}

In it, as one of her early poems says, she sensed ‘the word that, when all words
are said,/shall compass more than speech’.\textsuperscript{10} This, I suggest, was the source of
her poetic vocation: the attempt to speak the unspeakable, to pursue ‘the fugitive
gods’\textsuperscript{11}, if you like.

Poetry, as we know, is a special kind of language, but it is profoundly
paradoxical since, as Owen Barfield—a writer whose work interested Wright
and her partner Jack McKinney—wrote, it is like ‘a ship that sinks just as it enters
harbour’, taking us beyond common sense. For Wright, it seems, it was as if it
spoke her rather than the other way round. As ‘Poem and Audience’ has it,

The words go past you to another ear ...
... The voice is not our own,
and yet its tone’s deeper than intimate ...
... the implacable awaited voice
asks of us all we feared, yet longed, to say.\textsuperscript{12}

Language in this sense thus pointed to the ‘holy’, the mystery at the heart of
existence. But also to its absence, especially in a country in which, as far as we
newcomers are concerned, we have not properly listened and therefore have not
properly spoken. That was one of the reasons why Aboriginal Australia mattered
to her—because it knew about this kind of speaking. ‘Bora Ring’ laments its loss:

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.\textsuperscript{13}

The country, she felt, was mourning this loss, and this feeling increased as she
watched the suffering of the land and mourned with it:

I am what land has made
and land’s myself, I said.
And therefore, when land dies?
Opened by whips of greed
these plains lie torn and scarred.
Then I erode; my blood
reddens the stream in flood.¹⁴

Essentially it was a profanation and growing loss of the sacred, until in one of her last poems, ‘Easter Moon And Owl’, she declared:

The god’s long done for in this hemisphere,
and not even the Easter Moon would revive him:
your full-tide flood of light
won’t set him right.¹⁵

Nevertheless she knew she must continue to listen to the owl of wisdom, ‘Ruler of women/and singler out of poets’¹⁶, determined as she was to stay ‘on the track of the gods’, to follow her vocation as a poet. It seems to me that this sense of living in between some mysterious presence and its absence gives her work, the later poems especially, a special, poignant power. She contemplates a world on the brink of destruction:

[r]ound earth’s circumference and atmosphere
bombs and warheads crouch waiting their time.¹⁷

So I read her place in ‘the Australian tradition’ somewhat differently, putting it in a larger sense of time and place, a cosmic setting, if you like, which interrogates rather than celebrates our pieties. In our eagerness to read them in patriotic terms I think we have tended to ignore the note of uneasiness even in her early poems, a sense of homelessness, of inbetweenness. ‘For New England’¹⁸ is perhaps the clearest expression of this, expressing a tension between the land she wants to belong to and ‘the jealous bones’ that ‘recall/what other earth is shaped and hoarded in them’, which reaches its climax in the question, ‘Where’s home, Ulysses?’ Significantly, however, the only answer she finds is to give herself over to ‘the hard inquiring wind’, giving herself to the ‘pure draft’ of Being, as Heidegger would put it, ‘the Open, the great whole of all that is unbounded’.¹⁹

According to Heidegger, however, this is a commitment particularly incumbent on human beings since we reach ‘more deeply into the ground of beings than do other beings’.²⁰ This throws further light on the poems about birth and pregnancy. Consider, for example, the cosmic vision of ‘Woman To Child’:

Then all a world I made in me;
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

There hung the multitudinous stars,
and coloured birds and fishes moved.
There swam the sliding continents.²¹

It also illuminates love poems like ‘Our Love Is So Natural’:

Our love is so natural,
the wild animals move
gently and light on
the shores of our love.22

But that interplay in which ‘[w]hat is within becomes what is around’ is also
dangerous. The poem concludes with a sense of menace:

... [T]he avalanche gathers
above the green hill.

Our love is so natural —
I cannot but fear.
I would reach out and touch you.
Why are you not here? 23

Like all major love poets, she understands and celebrates the conjunction
between love and death, ‘the source to which all time’s returned’24, most notably
in the magnificent poems written after McKinney’s death.

The fact that the ‘[w]orld’s signed with words’ and that it is there that ‘light—
there love begins’25 also means that her vision of Australia is very different
from the colonial vision of terra nullius — an empty stage on which to play out
dreams of power and possession. For her it was, rather, an echo chamber, and
her concern was to respond to its resonance, to speak, as Rilke put it, with ‘such
saying as never the things themselves/hoped so intensely to be’.26 This led
to poems like ‘Nameless Flower’, ‘Scribbly Gum’ and ‘Gum Trees Stripping’,
and their attempt to keep the ‘sail of thinking ... trimmed hard/to the wind of
matter’.27 But far from leading to identification, these poems lead to a deeper
sense of her own separation. As ‘Gum Trees Stripping’, for instance, concludes:

Words are not meanings for a tree ...

... If it is possible to be wise
here, wisdom lies outside the word
in the earlier answer of the eyes.28

But this makes her a prophetic figure in a culture determined to satisfy its desires
at all costs, since she insists on limits. This insistence reaches its climax in last
poems like ‘Rockpool’ which confronts and accepts the savagery of the world:

the stretching of toothed claws to food, the breeding
on the ocean’s edge. ‘Accept it? Gad, madame, you had better.29

So she is able—as so many of us, our Prime Minister included, are not—to
acknowledge also the savagery of our history, particularly of our dealings with
the land’s First Peoples. In their plight she saw the extent of our destitution, our
emotional cowardice—described vividly in ‘The Dark Ones’, which deals with
the reactions of local whites to the fringe dwellers who come to town on pension
day. As their

[m]ute shadows glide
[t]he 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.\textsuperscript{30}

But she also sees the deeper significance of this presence, that these ‘dark ones’ who stand ‘on the other side of the road’ represent the other side of ourselves:

\begin{quote}
The night ghosts of a land
only by day possessed
come haunting into the mind
like a shadow cast.

Day has another side.
Night has its time to live,
a depth that rhymes our pride
with its alternative.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The townspeople refuse to accept this ‘depth’, however, and as the poem concludes, the ‘dark shadows’ ‘veer, drift away’ and

\begin{quote}
... with a babble of shamed relief
the bargaining goes on.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

For Wright, however, the business of money-making in which she felt she was complicit through her ancestors—

\begin{quote}
who gnawed at the fringe
of the edible leaf of this country — \textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

was disgusting because of its effects on the land and its First Peoples. ‘At a Public Dinner’, for instance, begins this way:

\begin{quote}
No, I’m not eating. I’ll watch the champing jaws,
solemnly eating and drinking my country’s honour,
my country’s flesh.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

But this feeling drew her closer to Aboriginal people—the point she makes in the poem she wrote to her friend Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), ‘Two Dreamtimes’:

\begin{quote}
If we are sisters, it’s in this—
our grief for a lost country,
the place we dreamed in long ago,
poisoned now and crumbling.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

At the same time she was aware of the way history divided them:

\begin{quote}
The knife’s between us. I turn it round,
the handle to your side,
the weapon made from your country’s bones.
I have no right to take it.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

For Judith Wright, Australia as ‘the place of a new beginning’ was still to be discovered. But for this reason, for many of us, she is a figure of hope, and the quotation from Heidegger with which we began explains why. It argues that in fact we live in a ‘destitute time’ in which we are in danger of losing our place in the cosmos—and, with it, our humanity—and that it is the poets who may show
us a way out, reminding us of where we really belong. If we are to survive then we need, as Eliade argues, to move beyond the linear time of history and desist from ‘any further “making” of history in the sense in which [we] began to make it from the creation of the first empires’ in order to return to the earth and, through it, understand our place in the cosmos. That is why, as Judith Wright, ‘that wisest of poets’, as Nugget Coombs called her, understood that Australia, the last of the continents to be invaded, may have a particular significance, since here and in the poetry she made about it:

The oldest of the old follows behind us in our thinking and yet it comes to meet us.

That is why thinking holds to the coming of what has been, and is remembrance:

Endnotes


5 J. Wright, ‘The Harp and the King’, *Collected Poems*, p. 158.


10 J. Wright, ‘Sonnet’, *Collected Poems*, p. 158.

11 M. Heidegger, ‘What Are Poets For?’, p. 94.


16 ibid., p. 342


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