A Wild Sound, Wild Wound: Some Thoughts on Judith Wright

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As an American poet, I have only recently stepped into the poetry and hemisphere of Judith Wright—my verb, stepped, for the act of reading, will begin to feel more appropriate when you come to the later, narrative portion of this essay. Rather than that of a discerning scholar, my relationship to Wright’s poetry has been more that of a fascinated reader and writer who quickly becomes the respectful apprentice. Apprenticeship has always been my most viable model for learning and growing, for strengthening poetic eye and ear, for stretching the horizon. As Wright has a great deal to teach me about risk-taking, about finding ways to speak of difficult things in language still musical, my apprenticeship with her has just begun.

When I read Judith Wright, I often feel as if she and I and others were sitting around a campfire late at night. Her poems happen to glance out past the glow of the fire, where they see things moving out there where it is otherwise too dark and shadowy to see anything at all, other than pure darkness and night. And because I am watching the poems so closely, because Wright has used language that lets me fully live inside her poetry, I glance too, and I begin to see what lives beyond the immediate ring of visible light. Through the eyes of the poems, through Wright’s poetic eyes, I too begin to sense some absence keeping silence and distance past the known rim of fire, some presence drawn into darkness and light at the same time. Her poems let me begin to feel like I have her extraordinary eyes. I begin to see how the earth is ghosted with things we have not acknowledged or integrated over a long time, things we think are gone, or absent, but are indeed present, shadowy, integral, and always moving just beyond our conscious or logical grasp, just past our limits of literal vision.

At some point in my reading of Wright, I jotted this in my notebook:

I find I’m talking about Wright, and almost to her, all the time now in my head. I see that so many of the same words come forth in us: the word word itself. Logos. Word and world. And there are lots of bones. Yes, and wind. And dream, dark, dust, child. And shadow and song. Many of her poems are songs. The archetypal figures moving through her poems are familiar to me: the blind man, the old man, the lovers, the child, the lost child, the dark, the
night, the seer, the river in flood and drought.

Ah, a poet I fathom
Ah, a poet who would fathom me!
Could we have met somewhere before?

Wright’s poems draw me into her paradoxical intelligence. They conjure her fierce sense of outrage and hopeful possibility, often rendered from the same image or breath. They evoke elegiac affirmation—or is it affirming elegy?—made so palpable in her brutal, tender poems. ‘How does she do this, how does she accomplish so much, including paradox, in such accessible poetry?’ I find myself asking of her work. And why hasn’t her courageous tongue been more widely acknowledged and revered here in the United States? Does she see more than is recommended or wanted, I wonder. Is she too subversive, too visionary, too scathing for many American readers?

As these questions arise, I implicitly begin to place Judith Wright among a circle of American sisters—activist women writers like Rachel Carson, Muriel Rukeyser, Meridel LeSeuer, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Terry Tempest Williams, Leslie Silko, writers whose lives overlap with Wright’s 85 years and whose sensibilities coincide. Many of these women have battled a kind of silence and silencing all their artistic lives, even as they have committed themselves to speak out, to resist aspects of Manifest Destiny and ‘progress’ that are in essence dehumanizing. They, like Wright, have used their writing to restore, where possible, social and ecological balances, and to advocate humility at the root of humanity.

Most of Wright’s poems fuse their lyric intensity with ecological and human activism. Hers is no ordinary eye in seeing conservation and human rights as integral to poetic craft and artistry. Consider in its entirety her poem ‘Australia 1970’:

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,
dangerous till the last breath’s gone,
clawing and striking. Die
cursing your captor through a raging eye.

Die like the tigersnake
that hisses such pure hatred from its pain
as fills the killer’s dreams
with fear like suicide’s invading stain.

Suffer, wild country, like the ironwood
that gaps the dozer-blade.
I see your living soil ebb with the tree
to naked poverty.

Die like the soldier-ant
mindless and faithful to your million years.
Though we corrupt you with our torturing mind,
Stay obstinate, stay blind.
For we are conquerors and self-poisoners
more than scorpion or snake
and dying of the venoms that we make
even while you die of us.

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
the drying creek, the furious animal,
that they oppose us still;
that we are ruined by the thing we kill.¹

Cadenced and elegantly controlled by its rhyming quatrains, this poem’s wildness is that of a dangerous but endangered predator, of a flooded river raging toward its drought-time. Its images evoke a fierce attachment to natural cycles in the midst of their corruption and ruin. The sequence of similes, ‘die like the eagle … like the tigersnake … like the soldier-ant mindless and faithful to your million years’, bring several oppositional energies into play: poison and praise, danger and endangerment, predator and prey, toughness and vulnerability, anger and sorrow. The very things Wright loves and reveres are being addressed — spoken to lovingly, yet commanded to die.

‘Australia 1970’ embodies a palpable, indeed painful tension, between holding onto ‘wild country’ and letting go of it at the same time, of being ruined by the things we have ruined, and of being sorrowful and sorry even as we cast that last ruthless command of death. The poem is both an ode and a keener’s grief cry, and Wright has mastered these highly charged and oppositional emotions through an artistry of imagery, form, and passionate, direct address to her country.

In Wright not only does natural history collide with human history. Her poems bring on all sorts of collision and confluence: the present with future and past; inner with outer cycles, dark with light, private with collective or archetypal imagery. As ‘Australia 1970’ demonstrates, such conflux occurs as one story collides into another, as image interweaves with felt idea. She is a poet of kinship and protestation in their most literal senses, and in much of her work kinship and protest must function side by side. The series of protesting natural phenomena she exalts in ‘Australia 1970’ — ‘the scoring drought, the flying dust, the drying creek’ — are the very elements her forebear, Albert Wright, struggled to his death against a hundred years earlier, as a settler in mid-19th century Australia.

Wright’s historical non-fiction, The Generations of Men, published in 1959, draws closely from her grandfather’s diaries to chronicle his 19th-century pastoral migration inland into his vast agricultural land holdings. The very same wild country Wright sings in her poems is viewed by her grandfather Albert as ‘obstinate and wild’², more often than not a series of obstacles to be conquered rather than natural, wild treasures to be praised or protected. From drought and dust to fever and flood, Albert Wright’s ‘wild country’ of the 1870s seemed intent on destroying whatever Anglo intentions it could, or the opposite must occur. The settler must conquer and subvert the elements, or else be conquered and ruined by them. Judith is sensitive to this struggle even as she depicts the origins of a challenged but prosperous pastoral tradition in The Generations of
Men. But she’s also laid the literary and historical ground of consequence; these heroic forebears must also bear the brunt of becoming the ‘conquerors and self-poisoners’ of ‘Australia 1970’.

The wild country—its rugged terrain, native vegetation, and its weather with all its unforeseen terms—is the cause of Albert Wright’s sorrow, illness, hardship and loss. But it is also his source of hope and economic possibility. As heir and writer, Judith Wright’s objective is not to resolve such tensions, but to live more deeply into them. Her writing strikes me as a courageous act of re-mapping. Her topographies of word and image include the ‘shadows cast’ by her forefathers’ diaries and records. Proud of, compassionate toward Albert’s struggles, losses and conquests, she also turns her eye and ear to ‘invisible’, silent struggle, displacement and loss occurring alongside his own, but not acknowledged or addressed in 19th-century pastoral time. If The Generations of Men sets us historically on the precipice of 20th-century consequence and aftermath, it is Wright’s subsequent work that demands we leap from that precipice into the very belly of the beast. As great art should, her poems illuminate the ravages of history. They interrogate and name the Shadow that lives within us, and without.

Margaret Somerville, a writer, activist and friend of Wright, has articulated some aspect of the ghostly, ghosted sense of presence–absence in Wright’s poems. ‘Judith says we live in a haunted country, torn between our love of the land and the guilt of invasion’, Somerville writes in her essay ‘To Cooloola’. In both archetypal and real senses, there is aboriginal presence and absence in Wright’s work. Divisions of pronouns (us/they) and colors (pale/dark) are named openly in her poem, ‘The Dark Ones’:

On the other side of the road,
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound.

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

...\nGo back. Leave us alone
the pale eyes say
from faces of pale stone.
They veer, drift away.

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

As chronicled in The Generations of Men, indigenous Australians, who tried to keep their own mysterious, ‘incomprehensible’ patterns with the place, greatly alarmed and unsettled the new Anglo stationers. Here is a passage as told
from the perspective of Wright’s grandmother, May, Albert’s young bride after arriving at Nulalbin, their station just south of the tropic in the Dawson Valley, Queensland:

It was often hard to be sure if they were out there or not, their bodies melted so strangely into the darkness of the stems. Sometimes in the long grass Bolliver (Wright’s horse) would almost step on the body of a child crouching, still and invisible. It would dart out from under him and disappear again in a moment, to go on with the game of watching without being seen. This sense of continual surveillance made May a little uncomfortable.

It was somehow unpleasant, she thought, to live among these people who were not people at all, whose minds she could not reach, whose games and dreams were incomprehensible to her.6

As heir, Judith Wright’s path is groundbreaking in its spirit of protest, inclusion and acknowledgement. Her artistic work involved seeing, listening and even voicing the ‘dark ones’, acknowledging indigenous history and presence, and advocating for their past, present, and future in a generation that as a collective force preferred, as did the forebears, ‘silence kept’ and ‘faces turned aside’.

In The Cry for the Dead Wright returns to ‘these hills my father’s father stripped’7, and to ancestry, but this time to chronicle the parallel story of devastation and displacement for the Wadja people who also lived on the land her grandfather and others lay claim to. Published in 1981, ‘Cry’ is in many respects the shadow story of The Generations of Men. Word for word Wright builds as agonizing a telling as in her chronicle of her forebears’ struggles and triumphs. The settling that Wright languaged as ‘pastoral migrations’ in The Generations of Men, becomes ‘pastoral invasions’ in The Cry for the Dead. Settlers become ‘weird invaders’ and ‘the blacks’ or the dark ones become the Wadja.8 ‘Even that name is uncertain’ she acknowledges in the first sentence of The Cry For the Dead, because ‘it is a name that does not seem to occur in early records of the people east of Expedition Range … Even the sound of that name,’ she laments, ‘with its softened consonants and long liquid vowels, has been lost now’ 9.

For Judith Wright, (who titled her first book of poems The Moving Image), one of the primary functions of art is to move and to protest certain human patterns—legacies of invasion, ruin, and silence. Poetry’s purpose is also to construct new shapes—positive, hopeful images through which we might realign ourselves with the world. ‘Poems can chill, shock/stop you cold in your tracks/functional as an axe,’ she writes in her poem ‘For M.R.’. ‘But, too, (they)/are a centering blaze in the field,/a sudden positive shape/sprung from the crowding leaves.’10 Wright mastered how a poem is a transfer of human energy, how poems should move, like dreams can, through associative spaces and circular time. And, like the dreams we don’t forget, the most important poems should defy quick grasp or placement, as they come to wake us up. Such poems are meant to move us, to ‘chill, shock, stop us cold in our tracks.’11

This is exactly what one of her poems did to me, as I stumbled quite literally upon it on a day when I was already scheduled to move quickly and unfathomably across the international date line, backwards a whole night and day in time, to leave an early spring afternoon in Sydney, sleep a long while
over the dark wash of the Pacific, to cross the meridian, and to arrive into an early autumn afternoon where the aspen leaves were flecked with gold in the Sierras above Reno, Nevada. It was the end of an inaugural, celebrative week of Watermark, a Muster of nature writing and writers, and my American companions and I were down to our last hour in Sydney. We hurried now to do the shopping we’d neglected for the past ten days. My body hastened to a parental task: with children awaiting my return, I could not board that huge plane and go home with no token of Australia after being on the ‘bottom of the world’ as my five-year-old daughter imaged it after I’d shown her where I would be going on our globe.

We hastened across the Sydney harbour, rushed in and out of crowds along the scenic quay, and I say, it was the wild sound of Judith Wright that chilled me, not the cool harbour air. It was her poem stopped me ‘cold in my tracks’ even as I tried to hurry across, almost jumping over it to keep up with my swift friends, to move as focused as they through the urban traffic to reach the marvellous shop with the didgeridoos, the tourist store where I would find the stuffed kangaroo with a fuzzy joey in the pouch for my daughter. The hour swiftly falling, my friends rolled on ahead. But I looked down and found myself standing in a circle of words. Judith Wright’s words, bronzed and embedded prominently in the walkway, words from her poem ‘Two Dreamtimes’:

I am born of the conquerors,
you of the persecuted.
Raped by rum and an alien law,
progress and economics,
are you and I and a once-loved land
peopled by tribes and stock-exchanges,
bought by faceless strangers.12

With only a moment to spare, I stood and acknowledged the moving images, the dark and the luminous truth of her poem. I felt the chill move through me like a ghost, and then I moved out of the circle of words and on to catch up, knowing Wright’s poem from the ground up had done its work of shock and chill, knowing I would return to her words.

As I do now. *I am born of the conquerors*: what a brave breaking of silence, what a fierce confession, blunt naming, I think to myself as I look again down into the blazing bronze of her poem: *you of the persecuted, raped by rum and an alien law, progress and economics …* To stand upon the bronzed word raped alone is enough to usher an indelible chill. But here is raped yoked by rum, alien law, progress and economics. Here is the disturbing, familiar list of imperialistic history, of environmental disregard, Australian and American; the list we are taught from the age of my daughter to be proud of, the list that casts its shadow and falls to silence and comes oozing back up from the ground like the wound of the ‘functional axe’ as we go about our shopping and our business. And here beneath my foot soles are tribes and stock-exchanges woven into one small golden line, followed by faceless strangers.

When I stood upon Wright’s words in Sydney, looking out upon the connective waters where in 1770 Captain Cook had hoisted the British flag while the
unacknowledged, invisible ‘dark ones’ peered out from behind the feathery foliage yet to have English names, for less than a minute in this wheel of time, I felt Judith’s poem do its timeless, human work. All in an inexplicable jolt, its connective tissue and breath, its outrage and its hope moved me in both affect and ideology.

Standing briefly upon ‘Two Dreamtimes’, I also sensed the connective timeless strand of my gender in the harbour mist, and I practically brushed it off to attend to my more pressing consumerist needs, to shop as a mother does to delight her children. As I stepped away, I marveled that these are a woman’s words enshrined and shining in their bronze circle on such a prominent, historical and public walkway. I marveled that the poetic passage chosen (by whom?) to commemorate this woman poet was so condemning of the hegemonic histories we are socialized to honour and uphold.

Wright’s bronzed passage, as well as her whole poem ‘Two Dreamtimes’ is subversive, attacking, apologetic, angry, inextricably female and alive with empathy. How did this come about, I wondered? I was impressed and envious. Here was Australia’s most revered poet, and someone had the vision, wisdom and courage to choose the unsafe passage, the critical glare, the silence-breaking scream to honor her in a highly public place. Perhaps it was Judith Wright herself who chose the passage. Whomever it was must have known ‘Two Dreamtimes’ had the power to stop us cold in our tracks, to move us as we moved over it, and to get us looking back and forward at the same time.

I try to imagine where, when, and under what circumstances I might as an American find myself standing upon the words of an equivalent voice, upon and within my own country. I close my eyes and begin to visualize upon our public walkways essential, truthful passages by American women writers, activists and artists who would embrace the legacy of Judith Wright and my imagination begins to run a little freer. This passage from Muriel Rukeyser’s poem ‘The Speed of Darkness’ comes to mind and for a moment I see it ablaze upon the many steps that lead our lawmakers up to the nation’s Capitol:

... yet unborn in this dark  
who will be the throat of these hours.  
Who will speak these days,  
if not I,  
if not you?\textsuperscript{13}

Might my country rethink parts of its own anatomy and history were its citizens stopped in their tracks and chilled, not by Homeland Security officers on patrol beneath the Washington Monument, but by these words from the same Rukeyser poem bronzed into the shadow of the towering phallic obelisk:

Whoever despises the clitoris despises the penis  
Whoever despises the penis despises the cunt  
Whoever despises the cunt despises the life of the child.  
Resurrection music, silence, and surf.\textsuperscript{14}

I then picture the words of Terry Tempest Williams bronzed in a prominent circle on the well-trodden, heavily-protected, safest sidewalk in the world, in
front of the White House:

What might a different kind of power look like, feel like? ... The open space of democracy is not interested in hierarchies but in networks and systems where power is circular, not linear ...15

But I know my country has a long way to go before it bronzes the words of Wright’s American sisters into our prominent public spaces.

The boldness of Wright’s ‘Two Dreamtimes’ passage embedded in Sydney Harbour’s Circular Quay was my moment of arrest, my true point of entry into Judith Wright. But I think I’d somehow been primed and prepared for her earlier that morning by a dream itself, not my own dream, but possibly that of a fair-haired infant named Henry. Lodging with friends in their one-room apartment overlooking Lavendar Bay, I was awoken at dawn to their little son’s inconsolable cry.

I’ve not heard a four-month-old crying from that dark a place ever before or since. It was not the cry of hunger, of needing to nurse, or be changed; it was not a cry of physical discomfort because too hot or too cold. Nor was it a cry of loneliness, of missing the human cradle of mother or father’s arms, as he’d slept through the night, nestled between them both. No, it was the sound of a deeper, older, more haunted cry. A cry that lives as bones do on the earth, elemental, liminal and windborne out of the dreamtime. It woke me as it did his parents.

Even with the distance of hemispheres, years, and seasons, I still hear Henry’s indelible cry. What has he seen that we cannot? What does he know at four months that we might already have forgotten? His skull is still soft and forming, the bones gradually coming together atop his pale and tufted crown, his very threshold of consciousness porous and open there, his soul perhaps still entering his new body through the fontanelle. I sense his cry is ancient rather than infant, I sense this fair-skinned baby already carries the legacies of absence and presence, darkness and light, the mappings of country and dream, possession and wound.

“We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness”,16 Judith Wright has written in ‘The Shadows of Fire: Ghazals’. That morning fire and darkness do not leave him even as dawn takes form in the tall, feathery eucalypts beyond the apartment windows. A bird, strange to my American ears but already the very larynx dawn to little Henry, cries out alongside him from the treetops. Soothing murmurs of the currawong, cooings of the gentle father and mother. Not breast nor touch, nor words, nor birdsong, can shush or push his cry away.

“I must enclose a darkness/since I contain the Sun”,17 Wright’s ends her poem ‘Shadow’. Like the sun itself, rising and filtering its incremental light through the trees, Henry calms only gradually and in waves of wild sound. Once the sunlight contains him he begins to coo again, his small voice now harmonic with the currawong in high limbs of the limbre eucalypts. He nurses and becomes himself again.

The dissonant haunt of Henry’s cry has never left me. Why shouldn’t the past ghost us, our children and our infants? I can fathom how our little ones carry the shadow of wild country, the invaded, the lost and the dispossessed. A baby, like
a poem, is exquisitely porous, almost transparent in its capacity to embody more than one world and time. Could Henry hear, or see, the dispossessed, the ancient dreamers? And like Wright has done, isn’t the poet someone whose fontanelle must stay supple enough to receive and conjure shadow and dreamtime, to urge others into crossing back and forth, from dark to light to dark, from wild wound to hope of healing?

Questions that grow from a baby’s cry only summon more questions. Anymore, are language and image enough to move us? What forms of activism must arise when language is no longer enough to stop us cold in our tracks? Without language and image how can we keep aggression mindful and merciful? Does a wild sound echo through everything, and will it be enough to do the work of ghosts? I have no answers, only another dream. This time I was the dreamer, and the poems of Judith Wright were the dream. Here is what I recorded in my notebook:

And now I am dreaming Judith Wright. I dream I am in a room where her poems are placed before a small, assembled audience. Her poems are hand written upon a delicate, light, translucent parchment paper. Like the arctic, the shushing sounds of white upon white. Like paw prints, her poems are beautifully written and so transparent they are almost invisible. The room seems divided. Whether to make them more visible or not. Whether to let them be as they are, luminous but hard to see. Some in the room think we should graft her poems onto another surface, to make them more accessible, although this procedure risks their destruction. To make the poems safer might destroy them. Others say leave them alone, do not tamper with the ink and fine parchment. They are beautiful and intact in their fragility.

Heads turn toward me for my opinion. I am only an apprentice, a newcomer to Judith’s poems but I know beauty and power and moving image when I see them. I speak on behalf of woldness and wilderness. I say keep them mysterious, opalescent and vulnerable. Let them blind us into a deeper seeing, an older ear. Let them conjure ghosts and cry a wild sound that wanes yet ever haunts.

Endnotes

3 Ibid. p. 102.
8 ibid. p. 11.
Laurie Kutchins has two books of poetry. Her third collection, Slope of the Child Everlasting, is forthcoming in 2007. Her poems and lyric essays have appeared widely in American periodicals, including The New Yorker. She teaches at James Madison University in Virginia and spends her summers along the Wyoming–Idaho border. In 2003 she participated in the inaugural Watermark, a festival of nature writing at Camden Head in New South Wales, and where she tasted Vegemite for the first time.