

Veronica Brady

To reinvent the world? The hope of being true to the Earth.

Abstract I: This paper responds to the premises of *Le Simplegadi* that we need today to make ‘the prodigious passage’ to the different world which will result from the realization of a different state of being. Arguing that poetry may well be a way of bringing this about, it explores the work of Judith Wright and attempts to show the kind of world it creates.

Abstract II: Questo articolo rispecchia le premesse de *Le Simplegadi*, ovvero la necessità di fare quel ‘prodigioso passaggio’ ad un altro mondo attraverso la realizzazione di un diverso stato dell’essere. Affermando che la poesia può essere un modo per attuare questo proposito, l’articolo esamina il lavoro di Judith Wright e cerca di descrivere il mondo che in esso viene creato.

We live in a dangerous time, ruled by the imperatives of what Hannah Arendt called “the catastrophic interiority of the selfish ‘I’” (Kristeva 2001: 39), a time in which the business of money-making, money-having and money-spending seems to have swallowed up life itself. But reinvention is possible since, as William Blake pointed out, the world is ultimately neither round nor flat but human-shaped. The way it is reflects the way in which we imagine it or, to refer to the idea important for *Le Simplegadi*, the way we weave together the elements of life. Our need today, it seems to me, as this journal says, is for the Hero-Artist to weave them in such a way that we reach “the Other Place.”

Antonio Gramsci, I suspect, had something like this in mind when he wrote that it is by “the conquest of greater consciousness” that we will be able to create a different kind of culture “since man is above all spirit” (Lippard 1983: 25). Just as importantly he argues that we will be able to do this by returning to what we once knew but have now forgotten. One way may be poetry, to the extent that it offers a passage to different states of being, and puts us in touch with what is otherwise speaking in a voice that is

...not our own,
and yet its tone’s deeper than intimate...
...the implacable awaited voice [that]

asks of us all we feared, yet longed, to say.
 ("Poem And Audience", Wright 1994: 210)

Based on the "exaltation of signs which rests on the denial of the reality of things" and sensuous human existence (Baudrillard 1990: 63) and therefore mistaking appearances for reality, our present culture is largely deaf to this voice and therefore oblivious to the fact that "[t]here is another world, and it is in this one." (1) The language it speaks is the language of imagination which, as Coleridge defines it, repeats "in the finite mind... the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM"(Abrams 1965: 239) and thus presupposes a sense of realities at present unseen but crucial.

This can be dismissed as merely romantic, but contemporary science is increasingly coming to speak of these realities with respect; Einstein, for instance, sees [h]uman beings as... part of the whole we call the Universe, a small region in time and space. They regard themselves, their ideas and feelings, as separate and apart from all the rest. [This] is something like an optical illusion and is a sort of prison [which] restricts us so that we put personal aspirations first and limit our affective life to a few people very close to us. Our task should be to free ourselves from this prison and to open up our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty (Clayton 1975: 127).

In what follows I would like to explore the ways in which the poet Judith Wright takes up this task. I would also argue that this is a task of particular importance for a post-colonial society like Australia. Wright herself realized this. Born, as she put it, into as one of "a conquering people", into a landowning English family who came to Australia in the 1830s and displaced its Aboriginal owners to take up land, she felt herself in a sense an intruder. However much she loved the land she often felt

...unloved by all my eyes delight in,
 and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.

Yet, knowing that "no land is ever lost or won by wars,/ for earth is spirit" and that "we are justified only by love", she set to this kind of justification to attune herself properly to the land on which she had grown up, the New England plateau, "my blood's country", which had been from childhood a living presence with "its bony slopes wincing under the winter" ("South Of My Days", Wright 1994: 20), even though her "jealous bones" still recalled "what other earth is shaped and hoarded in them" ("For New England", Wright 1994: 22), the earth of her English inheritance.

This sense of displacement, of

never remembering the Dream or finding the Thing
 ("The Child", Wright 1994: 34)

however, empowered her quest: as the Zen saying goes; "Touch the hole in your life and there the flowers will bloom." It enabled her to rejected the arrogance

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of the notion of *terra nullius* that allowed the colonisers to see the land as empty, a stage on which to play out their dreams of wealth and power and exploit the land. It also disregarded the Aboriginal presence. But from childhood riding across the land she had felt that presence, as something lost...

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 -

but also morally demanding:

...[T]he rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain.
(“Bora Ring”, Wright 1994: 8)

“Nigger’s Leap, New England”, written in the 1940s, for instance, a meditation on a nineteenth century massacre in which a group of Aboriginal men, women and children were driven over a cliff in revenge for spearing a few cattle confronts this fear, acknowledges the brutal reality of the event,

...the bone and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies,

and her own complicity as someone whose family profited from it:

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

Yet since ultimately “all men are one man at last” and those who died there were “ourselves writ strange.” (“Nigger’s Leap, New England”, Wright 1994: 15). This awareness grew throughout her career. Later, for instance, Wright became a close friend of the Aboriginal writer and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) and fought strenuously for justice for Aboriginal Australians, in particular for Land Rights, and for a Treaty. Her feeling for the natural world also put her in tune with indigenous culture. Another poem, for instance, recalls a moment in childhood in which she felt herself caught up in the flow of existence as a whole, into the “whole draft to which all beings, as ventured beings, are given over” (Heidegger 1971: 106), as Heidegger puts it, the flow which is central to an indigenous sense of reality, drawn into

...a thrust of green leaves
with the blood’s leap and retreat

warm in you;
 burning, going and returning
 like a thrust of green leaves
 out of your eyes, out of your hands and you feet.
 ("The Child", Wright 1994: 34)

There is nothing arrogant about this dialogue. The self does not stand over against the world to dominate it as it does in Western culture but participates in it, listening to it and understanding the limits of its own power. So another poem ("Scribbly Gum", Wright 1994: 131) acknowledges a "life I could not read" in the world around her in

...mountain, palm and fern
 spoken in one strange word

and another poem ("Gum Trees Stripping", Wright 1994: 133), recognizes that "[w]ords are not meanings for a tree" and the need therefore to

...be quiet and not look
 for reasons past the edge of reason

and so be "true to the earth" in this way. Implicit here is a recognition that

...our dream was the wrong dream,
 our strength was the wrong strength
 ("Dust", Wright 1994: 24)

and that our present culture is headed in the wrong direction, is out of touch with reality and thus dangerous to the earth as well as people - as the evidence of the human and environmental crisis facing us today suggests. One is reminded of Pascal's response to the "silence of the infinite spaces", the call to "proud reason" to "humble itself.". For Judith Wright also human beings are not the basis and primary referent of all reality spread out at our conquering feet, the belief which fuelled the imperial history which created new societies like Australia. As she puts it, we are "not single nor alone" but part of "the towering universe" which wheels "its faint lights in the far gloom." ("Praise For The Earth", Wright 1994: 188)

Forgetting that, as Heidegger argues, we have become unaware and incapable of our proper humanity; "Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned." (Heidegger 1971: 96) But as he says, the poets continue to pursue "the trace of the fugitive gods" and stay on their tracks (Heidegger 1971: 94). These tracks lead through bodily existence in this world, and as a woman Wright follows them closely, especially in her poems about love, birth and pregnancy and death. In them the logic of the body and the logic of the cosmos appear as two sides of the great reality.

One of her poems to do with pregnancy, for example, makes this connection very clearly:

Then all a world I made in me;
 all the world you hear and see
 hung upon my dreaming blood.
 There move the multitudinous stars,
 and coloured birds and fishes moved.
 There swam the sliding continents.
 ("Woman To Child", Wright 1994: 28)

Death too is confronted in all its power, especially in the poems written after the death of her partner Jack McKinney:

But as I sighed, I knew: incomprehensible energy
 creates us and destroys; all words are made
 in the long shadow of eternity.
 Their meanings alter even as the thing is said.
 ("Love Song In Absence", Wright 1994: 261)

It is this realism, I suggest, which enables her to accept the tragic reality of our times which our culture so consistently refuses to face. One of her last poems looks back over her life and times in the face of death without illusion:

My generation is dying, after long lives
 swung from war to depression to war to fatness.

And sets it in the context of life as a whole, standing on the edge of a cliff with a rockpool below watching its savage life,

...the claws in the rockpool, the scuttle, the crouch -
 greenhumps, the biggest barnacled, eaten by seaworms,

but also admiring the power of it all,

...the devouring and mating,
 ridges of coloured tracery, occupants, all the living,
 the stretching of toothed claws to food, the breeding
 on the ocean's edge.

So the poem concludes heroically with Dr Johnson's response to a woman who remarked to him that on the whole she accepted life: "Accept it? Gad, madam, you'd better".

It is this sense of nature's power which makes Wright such a savage critic of our culture's careless exploitation of the natural world, "eating and drinking my

country's honour/ my country's flesh", as she puts it, suggesting a kind of Black Mass. But the anger is also personal:

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.
 ("Jet Flight Over Derby", Wright 1994: 279)

The land for her is "full of a deep and urgent meaning", far beyond that of business plans and balance sheets since it is bound up with a history which reaches far beyond our human history, much less the brief history of colonisation: "These hills and plains, these rivers and plants and animals... [contain] the hidden depths of a past beyond anything that cities and the history of British invasion have to offer." ("Patrick White And The Story Of Australia", Wright 1992: 51).

To conclude then, in her life and work as a poet, Judith Wright attempted to weave together these different strands of reality and thus bring about an imaginative transformation of the world which is neither sentimental nor comfortable but rests on the tough-minded realism expressed in one of her last poems written sitting by the fire in winter:

Let's drink while we can. The sum of it all is Energy,
 and that went into the wood, the wine, the poems...
 ...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.
 ("Winter", Wright 1994: 425)

Her trust in the power of this larger life and the trust that it will go on and we with it so long as we stay in tune and are prepared to respect its mystery may well lead us to the 'Other Place', a richer state of being than we have now.

NOTES:

1. One of the epigraphs, a quotation from Paul Eluard, to Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*. 1968. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.

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Veronica Brady was born in Melbourne in 1929. She became one of the first Australian nuns to teach in a university, broadcast on radio or join in socio-political debate. After teaching at Loreto Convent in Kirribilli, NSW, she moved to the University of Western Australia in 1972, becoming an Associate Professor in 1991. She has spoken out publicly against the Vatican stance on abortion, homosexuality and contraception, and has been involved in the Aboriginal rights movement and the anti-uranium mining lobby. She also supports the ordination of female priests in the Catholic Church. Sister Veronica Brady is a member of many organisations including Amnesty International, the Campaign against Nuclear Energy, the Campaign against Racial Exploitation, the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Association for Study of Australian Literature. She is the author of several books including *The Future People*, *The Mystics* and *Crucible of Prophets*.