

Veronica Brady

The poetic of place: Judith Wright's At Cooloola. An Australian View.

Abstract I: The article denounces the crisis that present-day technological civilization has in its relation with the land, usually considered an object to exploit and conquer; the author advocates the need to develop a 'poetics of place' inspired by the respectful relationship that other civilizations have been able to establish with their land. The analysis of Judith Wright's literary work shows the complexity of an Australian view that explores the link between Aboriginal people and the land, and the way in which white settlement interrupted it.

Abstract II: L'articolo denuncia la crisi dell'odierna civiltà tecnologica in relazione alla terra, solitamente considerata un oggetto da sfruttare e conquistare; l'autore esprime il bisogno di sviluppare una 'poetica del luogo' che trae ispirazione dal rapporto rispettoso che altre civiltà sono state capaci di stabilire con la propria terra. L'analisi dell'opera letteraria di Judith Wright mostra la complessa concezione di un'australiana che esplora il legame tra gli Aborigeni e la terra, e il modo in cui l'insediamento dei bianchi lo ha interrotto.

Let us begin by recalling and honouring the land on which we are gathered and the people who lived on and cared for it for thousands of years (1). This is not a sentimental gesture. D. H. Lawrence defined sentimentality as "working off in words of feelings you haven't really got." But we are concerned here with the reality of place and with our feelings for it, and the fact is that it has a history and that its First Peoples have since time immemorial been an essential part of it. To acknowledge them therefore is crucial to a proper understanding of it. I would argue therefore that our failure to do so in the past may be one of the reasons for the crisis in our relations with the land which is now facing us.

If I may elaborate further on this, this helps to explain why we need to develop what I call a 'poetics of place', a feeling for the land and for its First Peoples. Mircea Eliade, for instance, sees this, the "transformation of chaos into cosmos", as the primary task of people newly arrived in a place hitherto unknown to them (Eliade 1974: 10). Yet by and large we have not been very successful in doing

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this. As Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson observes; “most Australians don’t know how to think themselves into the country, into the land” whereas Aboriginal people “find it hard to think without the land” (Keeffe 2003: 35).

The controversy over the short-listing for the Archibald Prize in 2006 of an Aboriginal artist’s self-portrait which was essentially a painting of the country in which she lived is an example of this difference.

In fact in the past and possibly still in the present it seems as if many of us feared the land. In the early years of settlement especially there was much talk of ‘conquering’ it - conquest, after all, was the dominant concern of colonisation. The first settlers mostly saw the land as an empty container to be filled with animals, crops, towns and cities and so rendered ‘productive’. It was, in Paul Carter’s words, a kind of theatre in which “Nature’s painted curtains [were] drawn aside to reveal heroic man at his epic labour on the stage of history” (Carter 1987: xv). But it seems to me that ignoring the power of the land has held back the work Peter Hay argued to be necessary for ‘any would- be civilised community’: the creation of a ‘moral community’, that is, finding our place in the larger scheme of things, what Eliade calls the “cosmos”.

The thinking of Emmanuel Levinas is relevant here. For him it is “in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty [...] that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being” (quoted in: Hand 1993: 85). What confronted us when we arrived in this country was an other-than-self, an environment very different from anything we had known on the other side of the world, a reminder that there are “more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our Western culture that ultimately we are not in charge of the universe but that we are - to borrow this time from Martin Heidegger - ‘thrown’ into existence as *Dasein*, the point at which Being (*Sein*) knows itself as there (*da*) and mortal and finite. This, as Levinas argues, is the beginning of a genuinely ethical existence which rests on responsibility. Self is not supreme; instead it is involved in and responsible to being as a whole. It follows therefore that settling in a new country is not so much a matter of exploiting it for our own human ends, ‘building on it’, as of learning to dwell in it, becoming part of a larger reality, what Heidegger calls, “‘the fourfold’” a relationship between ‘earth and sky, divinities and mortals’” (Heidegger 1975: 1) Significantly, this is how Aboriginal peoples have always lived in and with this country, though by and large it is not typical of settler societies like ours. I want to argue, however, that it should be because what Stanner’s Boyer Lectures in 1968 called the “Great Silence” which has surrounded Aboriginal people and their culture and lead us to view the land and its history almost exclusively from a “white” perspective has excluded “a whole quadrant” of reality from our understanding. (Ley 2006: 37)

But from the beginning one strain of our culture has attempted to explore and celebrate this area of reality, taking up the task of transforming ‘chaos into cosmos’. This is the ‘poetic’ tradition, the area of the arts in general and of

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poetry in particular. Concerned as it is with the dimension of the unconscious, of “the archaic, the oneiric, the nocturnal” which, Paul Ricoeur argues, is accessible only by means of symbols, “the surveyor’s staff and guide for becoming oneself” (Ricoeur 1969: 348), expressing what may otherwise be inexpressible, thus interrogating many of our cultural certainties and opening up new possibilities. This, I suggest, is happening in Judith Wright’s poem *At Cooloola* to which we now turn.

But first of all the poem needs to be put in context. Wright was born into a pastoral family who had lived and by the land from the first half of the nineteenth century. Unusually, however, she was not entirely at ease with this colonial inheritance, and it was the land which was the source of this unease. As a child it was her constant companion: “As a poet you have to imitate somebody,” she wrote, looking back, “but since... I had a beautiful landscape outside that I was in so much and loved so much... it was my main subject from the start... It comes to me naturally”. But it also became her teacher and the lessons it taught often were at odds with her culture’s: “Most children 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 yourself a good deal smaller than just I.” (quoted in: Brady 1998: 469) It called, that is to say, for the ego to lay down its sovereignty, according to Levinas the source of ethics and of “the very spirituality of the soul” (quoted in Hand 1993: 85). So the land was not just a background to the self but an active force at work upon and within it, ‘full of a deep and urgent meaning’ which challenged the colonial culture to which she belonged:

“These hills and plains... these rivers and plants and animals... contained the hidden depths of a past beyond anything that cities and the British invasion had to offer.” (Wright 1992: 51)

Her loyalty lay there in the land, not in the glorification of settlement. So her much quoted poem *Bullocky*, which is often read as a celebration of the pioneering myth, actually presents him not as a hero but as a madman. In “the hidden depths of the past” which she sensed in the land bespoke a presence which was also an absence for which she was somehow responsible. One of her early poems *Bora Ring*, for instance, a reflection on the remains of an Aboriginal ceremonial site, is about this presence:

The hunter is gone: the spear
is splintered underground; the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still.

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But the responsibility remains. Their absence speaks 'an unsaid word', an accusation that fastens in the blood the ancient curse, the fear as old as Cain (Wright 1994: 8).

In this world view we are all responsible for and to one another and to the land as living presence.

In this way she dissents from her inheritance: *For A Pastoral Family* written in the 1980s reflects on the imperial assumptions of her forbears,

[...] men and women who took over as if by right a century and a half
in an ancient difficult bush.
And after all the previous owners put up little fight,
did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human

but finds in this inheritance an ambiguous "base for poetry / a doubtful song that has a dying fall" (Wright 1994: 406), rejecting its implicit assumption that might equals right which therefore accepts the inevitability of Aboriginal dispossession, the logic of the imperial history which has more or less obliterated the Aboriginal story which was exemplified by the judgement in the case of the Yorta people in Victoria, for instance, which argued that 'the tides of history' had flowed over their land and abolished any claim they might have had to it.

Wright's for the land, however, took her beyond this kind of history to the time of the earth which had a different kind of story to tell. Another early poem, *Nigger's Leap, New England* (Wright 1994: 15-16) is about this story. It is a meditation on a place not far from where she grew up where in the nineteenth century Aboriginal people were driven over a cliff in retribution for spearing some of the settlers' cattle. But the power of place interrogated her:

Did we not know their blood [that] channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust.

As far as the earth is concerned 'all men are one man at last' and those who died here are 'ourselves writ strange'. So

...[w]e should have known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.

This awareness contrasts with the ideological complacency which leads one critic to write that the poem "has for its subject... the suicide of the Aboriginals years ago". (Brissenden 1968:42). As the use of the adjective "Aboriginals" rather the noun, 'Aborigines' suggests, he sees them collectively merely as part of a category different from his own and, as the word 'suicide' implies, somehow morally deficient. He is unable to think outside his ethnocentric frame and to

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acknowledge the claims of the other, an inability evident also in those who reject what they dismiss as 'the Black Armband school of history', the attempt to see things from the point of view of those excluded from official history.

Another poem, *At Cooloola* (Wright 1994:140-1) explores the link between Aboriginal people and the land and the ways in which white settlement interrupted it. But it also acknowledges her own involvement through her family in this interruption, the way in which, as Levinas puts it, the "da of her *Dasein*" has involved the "usurpation of somebody else's place" (Hand 1993: 85). Once again, this poem is a meditation on place which offers a challenge rather than consolation, a demand which she cannot fully meet but cannot avoid.

It is set this time in a coastal area of Queensland, Cooloola, an area incidentally where clashes were later to occur between environmentalists and developers intent on exploiting the mineral sands to be found here.

It is evening and the poet is watching a blue crane fishing in a pool. But once again we are drawn into the time of the earth in the realisation that the crane and his kind have been fishing in this pool 'longer than our centuries'. He is therefore 'the certain heir of lake and evening', 'and he will wear their colour till he dies'. But she is a mere onlooker, 'stranger, come of a conquering people'.

The sight of a piece of driftwood shaped like a spear thrust from the pool is a reminder of this, recalling an incident from her grandfather's diary, when one day riding at noon 'a black accoutred warrior armed for fighting' suddenly appeared before him and just as suddenly disappeared. In her family history, *The Generations Of Men* (1965), Wright associates this apparition with an incident some weeks earlier when he had come upon the bodies of three young Aboriginal warriors and one old man lying in the bush, evidently murdered. But he realised that they had been on a peaceful hunting trip since they were not wearing the feathers and clay decorations of men going to war. But they had been shot and dragged into the bush, and their bodies half-hidden by branches, perhaps the night before (Wright 1965: 50). As the local justice of the peace it was his obligation to investigate their death. But in fact he had done nothing.

The implication in the poem, however, is that this apparition is a ghost representing the dead: according to his grand daughter the discovery had remained 'a heavy load' on his conscience. But for her the debt remains as she watches the crane:

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.

Ghosts, of course, have no place in current commonsense. But in Aboriginal culture they did, and still do: and the poem pays tribute to their beliefs:

Those Aboriginal people who first named Cooloola

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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.

This is the crux of the poem but also of Wright's understanding of place. It is possible to dismiss this as merely 'poetic'. But many contemporary scientists, increasingly interested in and respectful of the unseen, suggest that the universe may be more open, subtle and supple than we have imagined (Harris 1998: 9), and some would even regard the cosmos as a "psychophysical entity" evolving towards increasing consciousness, "in this way both [producing] us and, ultimately, [participating] in us to become real" (Studer 1998: 21-2).

If this is so, the poetic imagination may be more illuminating than commonsense.

Wright was aware of this, writing to a friend that "even scientists...[no] longer regard the physical and the psychic as separate, and all the work being done seems to confirm this— what is the observer, what the observed? Can you tell the dancer from the dance?" (Brady 1998: 287). It may therefore be true to say, that, as Heidegger put it,

The oldest of the old follows behind
 us in our thinking and yet it
 comes to meet us in our thinking (Heidegger 1975: 10)

and that the land may therefore be haunted. The fear expressed in *At Cooloola* may be justified, not only existentially but also ethically. The fear occasioned by the death of these others, Levinas suggests, may represent not "an individual's taking fright" (quoted in Hand 1993: 84) but the beginning of genuine moral community since he argues, ethics can be seen as answer to what is said by the other - the other and the land being two sides of the one reality here.

If this is so *At Cooloola* may have important things to say about the problems facing us at the moment in the attempt to build and preserve 'moral community', to contest what Hannah Arendt calls "the catastrophic interiority of the selfish I" (quoted in Kristeva 2001: 39) by the "laying down of the ego of its sovereignty" (Hand 1993: 85). To think oneself into the country may therefore be to think oneself into the meaning of being, to "return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness [...] to its capacity to fear injustice more than death [...] and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it" (Hand 1993: 85). That, the penultimate stanza of *At Cooloola* suggests, remains a task yet to be completed by us in this country. But the land itself keeps it before us:

White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark,
 clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan -
 I know that we are justified only by love,
 but, oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.

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NOTES:

1. The land referred to here is Australia (editorial note).

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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

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