

BRUCE BENNETT: Judith Wright, Moralist

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Judith Wright is an influential presence in Australian literary and social life. In a nation not given to self-examination she has become a voice of conscience whose public opinions and judgments, as well as her poetic practice, often seem so irreproachable that younger creative artists have sometimes felt hampered by her influence even while recognising their debt. Robert Adamson, for instance, has written that Judith Wright's work taught him that 'Poetry could be both a social activity and an adventure through the mind's landscape'.⁽¹⁾ But the influence was one that had to be broken for fresh growth to occur: 'when the creator finally becomes an object of devotion, an inevitable desire to break free from entangling aspects of that love develops and the subject becomes blind to the master's creation.' In his sympathetic and generous commentary on Judith Wright's work for the Australian Writers and their Work series, A. D. Hope has noticed the 'nobleness' of her poetry and the 'sybilline quality' of almost everything she writes.⁽²⁾ Professor Hope has also remarked the consistency of viewpoint in Judith Wright's polemic and her poetry,⁽³⁾ a consistency which is reinforced by the recent publication of her occasional essays and lectures written between 1954 and 1974, entitled *Because I Was Invited*.⁽⁴⁾ We can now see more clearly the close connections between poet and public speaker and some of the causes of adulation and resistance to her influence.

Judith Wright's poetry at its best, more than her prose, opens up levels of awareness and understanding that involve both contemplation and a changed, or refined, moral outlook. But informing both modes is an attitude of reverence for life that makes her, paradoxically, a subversive: or, to adapt a saying about E. M. Forster, a renegade corpuscle in the Australian bloodstream. *Because I Was Invited* shows her concern over these years with the development of a 'moral ethic' arising from our reading of literature, that could inform our education systems, our relations with the Aboriginal people and our treatment of the environment.

The public persona, the Judith Wright who addresses herself to educationists, university students or representatives of government, emerges from her various papers and speeches as a human being whose guiding impulses are both conservative and reforming. She is concerned primarily to reform Australian society by rescuing the living aspects of its forgotten past. Her methods are not those of the rationalist, for she has a deeply held belief in the primal energies of the human heart. Nor are her methods those of the satirist: although indignation or a muted anger occasionally surface in her work, she is usually too passionately involved in her concerns to indulge in ridicule or the witty aside. Consequently her public statements are often less entertaining than those of A. D. Hope,⁽⁵⁾ whose moral outlook is more obliquely presented than Judith Wright's, having its roots in Augustan literature and attitudes to life rather than in Romanticism.

Judith Wright's outlook derives no doubt from her life experience, her sense of how things are. She would be quick to dispel any talk of the primacy of literature over life. But literature to Judith Wright is a source of life; and the wellsprings of her poetic inspiration seem to lie in the Romantic movement in English literature, particularly in the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats. This gives her previously unpublished essay 'Romanticism and the Last Frontier' ⁽⁶⁾ special importance. The essay is a penetrating examination (though not a complete or exhaustive one) of the transplantation of English Romantic ideals and poetic modes into Australia. Aspects of the discussion have appeared previously in separate essays on Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*,⁽⁷⁾ but the argument is less coherently expressed there.

The gist of the argument is that the strengths of the early Romantic movement are apparent in Harpur's poetry, and its decline into second-hand ornamentation and sentimentality in Kendall's. What is interesting

here is Judith Wright's emotional commitment to the shaping spirit of early Romanticism, with its emphasis on the creative imagination:

The relation of man and nature was to be found in and through that spirit; and to early Romanticism at least, nature was a living whole which could communicate with man, a guide and guardian, a continuing source of comfort and inspiration. (p. 64)

Judith Wright relates the fading of that vision, as many literary historians have done, to the increasing materialism of nineteenth century England and the industrial revolution. Wordsworth's early poetry represents the acme of Romanticism; Tennyson, Rossetti and William Morris its decline into decoration, ornamentation and sentimentality. While I share that view, I think that the argument is incomplete without mention of another species of decline in England, which led to the verse of opinion and declamation of Kipling and Newbolt; and the latter decline was one which also had its Australian counterparts in O'Dowd, Gilmore (at her worst), Baylebridge and others. According to Judith Wright's argument, Christopher Brennan's *Poems 1913* marked the end of a phase in which English and European influences were paramount: poets who followed, such as Hugh McCrae, John Shaw Neilson, Furnley Maurice and William Baylebridge turned back in the main to more immediate Australian concerns.

What is it that moves Judith Wright to give such close attention to these neglected Australian poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Clearly, her discussions of these writers are more than exercises in antiquarianism. Equally clearly, they are consistent with the writing of her family history, *The Generations of Men*,⁽⁸⁾ and poems such as 'Brother and Sisters', 'Remittance Man' and 'South of my Days', in which images of the past are revived gently, reverently and with a sense of what they can mean for the development of an Australian identity in the present. Indeed, Judith Wright's family history, poetry and criticism can all be seen to contribute to our sense of what A. N. Whitehead called 'the witness of the past'.

Among the early post-Federation poets, Judith Wright had already published separate accounts of McCrae and Shaw Neilson in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. In *Because I Was Invited* she has a second look at Shaw Neilson (but makes no major reevaluation) and gives special attention to William Baylebridge and 'Furnley Maurice'. In line with her belief in the living relations between past and present in a community, she stresses the relevance of these writers to modern concerns. Other critics have given them attention, but none with such insight born of fellow feeling. Nor does her approach imply a derogation of the critic's function. While Baylebridge's thought-system is interesting (particularly in its ambiguities) Judith Wright finds a rhetorical 'hollow ring' in much of his verse. The 'modern problem' which he exemplified is that of using poetry as a 'mask', not as a 'bridge': making the self vulnerable by cloaking it in an impersonal poetic rhetoric instead of allowing it to adapt continually in response to new experience. He is the moralist who doesn't know when, or how, to stop.

The problem with Furnley Maurice is somewhat different. Like Baylebridge, he was interested in encouraging 'Australianism' in Australian writing and he had strong political views. The opening paragraph of Judith Wright's discussion of Maurice 'places' him with beautiful succinctness:

If you accept the generalisation that Melbourne has generally been a decent, quiet, liberal-minded, civilized place, while Sydney is a more flamboyant and tough one, you can bring forward Frank Wilmot or 'Furnley Maurice' as an epitome or exemplification of Melbourne's qualities. His father was secretary of Victoria's first Socialist group, and Wilmot, in his quiet way, carried on the tradition of family socialist reformism; it was a solid, earnest, practical reformism, the sort that carries a brief-case, not a flag. (p. 107)

She explains his belief in everyday language as a natural extension of his belief in everyday men and events, but this led him towards a poetry of suburban and domestic flatness; in technique it tended towards statement rather than symbol. This was 'the peril of the common way', which Maurice himself recognised.

Having in mind her own struggles with the poetry of symbol and of statement and her concern not to stray too far from 'the language of common men', it is interesting to observe Judith Wright's attempts to seek justification in Maurice's verse for the perilous 'common way'. Finally, she finds justification in a view of the everyday which sees it as 'part of a great pattern of development much more meaningful and finally beautiful

than could be seen in any of the small struggling lives that contributed their mite to the whole'. (p. 109) Such a view gives signs of emerging from time to time in Maurice's work, as in the following lines:

*As though the coral of the Barrier Reef
In spite of time and thrashing storm and the filth of shags
Could raise in blind compulsion, without knowledge or belief,
A pearly lighthouse over its own hull-tearing crags.*

But why does Judith Wright's own poem 'The Builders' have such greater force than the sudden violence of these lines? It seems to me that the imaginative penetration of her poem derives from a firm faith, not in the brotherhood of man, where Maurice sought it, but in 'the quick, the sensitive, the lover'. Her duty is, in Faulkner's words, 'to the alive, to the red bitter blood boiling through the land'. Perhaps not so bitter with Judith Wright; but her vision, while like Maurice's in that it has an evolutionary basis, is yet based firmly in nature, and not in man's utopian dreams, socialist or otherwise, of a better future for mankind. And apart from the different visions which inform their writing, there is a clear difference in their levels of commitment to the art of making poetry. Perhaps Maurice's refusal to take much interest in poetic problems was a result of living in a society that had low literary standards and expected little of its writers. But as Judith Wright points out, with some truth, Neilson and Brennan had managed to achieve a distinctive poetic personality and appropriate technique in the same atmosphere. The chief shortcoming, she concludes, was in Maurice himself:

It was Maurice's amateurism, not his choosing of the 'common way', that spoiled so much of his work; mediocrity was not a necessary corollary of refusing the 'frightful heights and the sounding depths'. (p. 113)

We can only concur, having now as evidence Judith Wright's transformation of the 'common way' in her own poetry.

In her various writings on Australian literature, Judith Wright consciously avoids what she perceives as 'academic' criticism. She takes the battle straight to the doors of the universities in the Foreword to her latest book:

I wonder if it is possible or relevant to engage in academic literary criticism any more. The real bearing of literature is not in its structure and language, but in the way it emerges from and reflects our total situation, as individuals and as societies; and that situation seems to me now, as we increasingly abdicate our lives to the technotronic state, too urgent for us to take much interest any longer in the calmer backwaters of critical argument. The writer is a human voice; literature is a mirror, sometimes even a source, of our values and our actions, our problems and our attempts to come to terms with them. (p. viii)

This charge certainly does not take account of some skilful socio-literary criticism that is beginning to emerge from Australian universities; and there is surely a place (argues the academic) for calm, unimpassioned assessments of literary works, in which the critic is not chiefly concerned with grinding an ideological axe. However, the indictment still has validity: the post-war record of Australian university English departments shows the strong influence of the analytical methods of New Criticism, which have tended to cut literary works off from their sources and too often made the study of literature a sterile exercise in dissection. Judith Wright's approach is personal and committed and it stresses what Richard Hoggart has called 'reading for tone and values'.

To those who put the emphasis on standards in literature Judith Wright points out that these are relative according to the culture and society that propagates them; and to those who argue that universities should restrict their studies to noncontroversial topics she points out the need for students to understand the values and attitudes of their society in relation to those of the writer whose work they are studying. Flying in the face of the 'intentional fallacy' she asserts that it is more important that criticism should consider the content of a work, the background and situation of a writer, what he is 'trying to do' than to concentrate exclusively on verbal structure and style. Significantly, her interest is in literature (and particularly poetry)

as an agent of 'truth': the significant writers are 'truthtellers' who can lead their readers to discovery of truths about themselves. There is nothing new in all this of course: Matthew Arnold also perceived literature as a 'criticism of life' which could yield truths about man's spiritual and moral being; and a tradition of socio-literary criticism which includes T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis has followed in his train. What is interesting in Judith Wright's alignment with this tradition is her application of its tenets to Australian writing. As has been the case in a good deal of recent Canadian criticism,¹⁰ the model is a dialogue between critic and writer rather than an inquisition directed by a severe judge at the expense of the unfortunate writer.

Judith Wright's criticism of literature is closely related to her criticism of society: the connecting link is her notion of the creative imagination, which should be nurtured in a literary education and fostered in relations between individuals and groups in a society. Unfortunately, formal education and other social situations often stultify creativity:

I am sure that many children have creative and imaginative capacities which go unnoticed, are neglected, crushed and even jeered at, because of the material demands of society, too practical an approach to education and the deadening kind of life lived by their elders. For many children, school is the only chance of finding some alternative to the television programme and the suburban way of life. But too often what they meet in school reinforces, not contradicts, the attitudes they find in daily life. Ought poetry not to be one of the most important windows they can find on a different way of thinking and living? ('The Role of Poetry in Education', p. 14).

Her thinking here, which may at first seem conservative in the extreme, accords with an increasing weight of research evidence indicating the predominance in school situations of 'transactional' over 'expressive' or 'poetic' uses of language and the deadening effects that this predominance can have.¹¹ Moreover, she is clearly aware of the complex interconnections of language, thought and behaviour:

If the child has had a literal upbringing, he will not only be confused, but scornful. He will have lost the chance, not only of appreciating the art of poetry, but of enriching his own life, vocabulary and sense of language; and language.... rules all our lives and dictates how we experience, and to some extent what we experience. To be interested in language is to have a way open into being interested in life, and being able to interpret and respond to experience in a more complex and varied way. In fact, to have a poor tool for the interpretation of experience is often to have a limited and povertystricken existence. (p. 21)

The aim here is liberation through language, a theme to which Judith Wright frequently returns.

Education then, is the nexus of her social thinking. She protests at the trends towards 'fact and rote-learning, with a bias towards the useful sciences' (p. 21), but her argument is not simplistically anti-science. In a paper written to commemorate Sir Macfarlane Burnet's 70th birthday in 1969, she makes it clear that science is not the enemy of creativity. C. P. Snow's *Two Cultures* had oversimplified the problem:

The real split is not... so much between scientists and literary intellectuals as between two sides of our own human nature; between the creative and imaginative, which is shared by scientists, inventors and the practitioners of the arts as well, and the mechanic or materialistic, the manipulative or powerhungry side of us which seizes on the achievements of science and transforms them into technological machinery for uses which scientists themselves, as well as artists, cannot help but deplore. ('Science, Value and Meaning', p. 196.)

'The manipulative and power-hungry side of us.' It is that which has virtually destroyed Aboriginal people in Australia and denied them a real voice in our consciousness or in our affairs. Judith Wright's way of reintroducing the Aborigine into our thinking is not to restate the violence of the European takeover, but to coax her white middle class reading public into an understanding of the actual and potential creative achievements of the Aboriginal people. This, she admits, 'takes an imaginative reach of sympathy beyond the capacity of most of us' since the Aborigines have always been 'objects of wonder and contempt' (p. 152). Her faith in the bridging power of the creative imagination may seem naive; it goes with a suspicion of the 'scientific objectivity' of most anthropological investigations. But it may just be true that greater truths about

Aboriginal people are to be gleaned from their art work, including their writing (who among us has read Kath Walker, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson, Wilf and Olga Reeves, Dick Roughsey?) than in the mountainous surveys, theses and reports that proliferate on 'the Aboriginal problem'. At any rate, Judith Wright's approach merits attention: to begin by listening receptively, imaginatively, to the Aborigines' own voices knowing that conventions and standards are relative and that the dominant group in a society has no automatic right to dictate the terms of play.

Like her concern for Aborigines, Judith Wright's concern for the physical environment is long-lasting, knowledgeable and deeply felt. Now that the environmental bubble is bursting and some politicians are calling for the abolition of public funds to support 'non-professional' environment protection associations, Judith Wright's stand is bound to appear vulnerable:

If our times have not been kind to poetry, they have been even more unkind to what is its source, and the source of life and language-the living earth from which we have separated ourselves, but of which we are part and in which we cannot help participating. (p. vii).

Soft? Sentimental? Outmoded? Something of each, perhaps, given current cultural and social presuppositions. But true?

Although the consequences of thoughtless industrialisation are dire, it is typical of Judith Wright's whole moral outlook that the slow process of educating public opinion is her preferred mode of approach. She charges the universities with a special duty to educate students in ecology; and one suspects her influence in the recent establishment of a Chair of Environmental Studies at Griffith University in Queensland. We can see in this something of Judith Wright, reformer and public figure:

Our institutions-educative, legal, social, economic and political-are no more than reflections of the attitudes and demands of society, its knowledge or lack of it; its priorities. It is these that must be studied and altered, if we are to change our world-picture radically enough to achieve a stable relation between ourselves and our planetary resources. (p. 229).

While we may be disappointed at the impersonal style here (haven't we heard these things before-and from lesser writers?) there can be no doubt that a truly radical approach is recommended: 'to change our world picture'.

It is clear in retrospect, more noticeably in the light of her published essays and lectures, that the world-view of Judith Wright's poetry, early and late, is consciously set against the assumptions and tendencies of an acquisitive and materialistic society. Her *Collected Poems*, which are unquestionably more important to Australian literature than her occasional lectures or discussion papers, can now be seen more clearly as in part an attempt, by a socially aware writer, to educate the feelings of her reading public. This awareness of an educative function for the writer is more evident in the later poetry (especially since the collection *Shadow*, published in 1971). It is accompanied by an occasional tendency to 'tell' rather than to 'show' her poetic subject as her persona turns to face the harsh urban world of the 1970s. The increased assertiveness of some of her later writing possibly signals a realisation that the tide is running out on her ideals. But she remains for the most part a vulnerable, feeling personality in both *Shadow* and her most recent collection of poems, *Alive* (1971-2).

Her emphasis must be recognised as quite different from Patrick White's, which presents Australia as a country in which 'the mind is the least of possessions'. To Judith Wright, a greater cause for regret is the undeveloped heart of the average Australian. The central paradox of her point of view, and the major cause of tension in her poetry, is summed up in her epigraph from Francis Bacon's *Wisdom of the Ancients*, which precedes her second collection of poems, *Woman to Man* (1949):

Love was the ancient of all the gods, and existed before everything else, except Chaos, which is held coeval therewith'.

The celebration of that primeval, unifying principle of love, in the teeth of chaos, is the basis of a constructive and life-enhancing moral outlook which is implicit throughout Judith Wright's work.

Notes

1 Robert Adamson, 'Alive and Well', *The Australian*, Saturday, 7 July 1975, p. 18.

2 A. D. Hope, *Judith Wright* (Australian Writers and their Work: Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1975), p. 36.

3 *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

4 Judith Wright, *Because I Was Invited* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1975).

5 cf. A. D. Hope, *Native Companions* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974).

6 *Because I Was Invited*, pp. 59-80. The discussion is a revised version of lectures given at the University of Sydney in 1958.

7 Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1965), Chs. I and II.

8 Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1959).

9 *Because I Was Invited*, pp. 115-128 and 107-114. 'William Baylebridge and the Modern Problem' was originally a lecture given for the Commonwealth Literary Fund at Canberra University College in 1954 and was published in abbreviated form in *Southerly*. 'Furnley Maurice: the peril of the common way' is a previously unpublished lecture given for the English Department, University of Queensland, in 1969.

10 See George Woodcock, *Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays on Canadian Writers and Writing* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1970); Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Anansi, Toronto, 1972).

11 e.g. James Britton, *Language and Learning* (Allen Lane, London, 1970); *A Language for Life* (London, H.M.S.O., 1975); Tony Delves, *Issues in Teaching English* (Melbourne University Press, 1972).

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