

## SHIRLEY P. WALKER: Women Believe In The Moon

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Judith Wright, *Fourth Quarter and Other Poems* (Angus & Robertson, 1976), 71 pp.

The publication of *Fourth Quarter*, Judith Wright's latest volume of poetry, is a significant event, occurring as it does just thirty years after her first volume *The Moving Image*. In a way, the poems of *Fourth Quarter* crystallise many of the themes which have preoccupied the poet during those thirty years. At the same time, the poet has not lost her power to surprise us with her new and often quite startling treatment of those themes.

*Fourth Quarter* is one of the most thematically unified of any of the poet's volumes, for the whole collection constitutes a celebration of the feminine principle - the dynamic of love and creativity, both physical and imaginative, which so dominated the earlier poetry. The central symbol is the moon in its different phases and various aspects, for the moon controls the ebb and flow of the tide, the mysterious cycles of the feminine, and the "salt blood" of man which betrays his marine origin. The sublunary world is the world of physical change and flux, and in these poems the poet reaffirms her earlier commitment to it. Moreover, the moon as muse inspires the imaginative and creative power of the unconscious. Which, according to Jung, is feminine in essence. In these poems the emphasis is upon psychic rather than physical creativity, and the source of psychic power (the unconscious) is symbolised by sleep, dream and water. Water and the sea image the source of and the ebb and flow of creativity. The individual in dream or creative states floats upon the sea of subjectivity like a boat lightly tethered to the tangibility of rational thought. All aspects of creativity, such as the vision of Burley Griffin, are related to this generative compulsion, and subsidiary symbolic motifs such as the owl and the hare (these are traditionally associated with the moon), the platypus, the whale, and the termite queen, are brought into play to amplify the conception, and to expand its reverberations out to the furthest horizons of feeling, intuition, meditation, vision, and the action which stems from these states.

Against this creativity is set the concept of rationalism symbolised by the daylight world, the land, and the active male principle. Here the poet's attitude towards evil is interesting. In "White Night", from the previous volume *Alive*, she poses a question which has been a constant preoccupation throughout her poetry:

*Where does it all begin?*

*If evil has a beginning*

*it may disclose its meaning.*

and the poems of *Fourth Quarter* provide her answer. Here evil is placed in perspective as the inevitable consequence of rationalistic ways of thought, of the dissociation of thought and feeling, and the denial of human values which this split involves. From the rationalistic principle stem all the evils of the modern world - war, inhumanity, environmental despoliation and mechanistic ways of life and thought. The consequences of rationalism are, once again, taken out to their furthest limits. They apply not only to the physical world but to the mind of man. The sludge and detritus of modern civilization has silted up and choked not only the pure streams of the physical world ("At Cedar Creek"), but the well-springs of the unconscious. Yet nature will not be spoiled nor will the creative power of the psyche ever be completely suppressed. This is the point of the poem "Platypus", where the platypus is both itself and the elusive poetic impulse which is threatened by the ugly consequences of a polluted word and rationalistic ways of thought:

*Platypus, wary paradox,*

*ancient of beasts,*

*like a strange word rising  
through the waterhole's rocks,  
you're gone. That once bright water  
won't hold you now.  
No quicksilver bubble-trail  
in that scummy fetor...*

Yet when the conditions are right ("At midnight and alone / there's a stir in my mind") the streams run clear, and the paradoxical image, half memory and half symbol, rises up through the scum which threatens to block it:

*suddenly my mind  
runs clear and you rise through..  
platypus, paradox -  
like the ripples of your wake.*

Within this dialectical framework - the creative feminine principle against the rationalistic will to power- the keynote of the poetry is acceptance. For instance the poet's former preoccupation with poetic or linguistic failure, as shown in such poems as "For Precision", "The Lake", "Nameless Flower", "Beside the Creek" and "The Real Dream", is at last resolved, for her own shortcomings are freely conceded, placed in perspective, and accepted as simply a reflection of and a parallel to the waning moon and the ebbing tide:

*In my last quarter  
let me be hag, but poet.  
The lyric note may vanish from my verse,  
but you have also found acceptable  
the witch's spell  
the witch's curse.*

*("Easter Moon and Owl")*

The poet accepts her decline, projects herself into the tragicomic figures of age and sibylline power ("hag" and "witch"), and defies the moon's advice to "throw it in", for her response to nature is still powerful, still sensuous:

*...still this rim of gold,  
this last-light tongue  
touches me till I shiver.*

*("Fourth Quarter")*

There's still "gold to win", and the poems of *Fourth Quarter* are the proof of it. Although the volume opens with a traditional address to the muse, the tone is ironic and wry, and the muse is no longer the abstract Power, Truth or Love of an earlier stage, but the moon, the symbolic embodiment of the imaginative life of mankind. Here the continuity of all artistic endeavour (the moon will make a "comeback") is set against the individual poet who "won't be back again / or not this way". In "Easter Moon and Owl", this continuity is further emphasised and, at the same time, the antithesis of imagination and intellect, emotion and reason, which dominates the volume is established. The moon is closest and clearest at the Easter season; its "full-tide flood of light" most powerfully felt. Women and poets are the true citizens of the moon in its dual aspect

of ruler over the sublunary cycles and over the world of the imagination. The male world of intellect and action (the colonization of space and the reduction of the mysterious power of the moon to mere matter) and of appropriation ("Their red brand's on your flank") is here established, and declared subject to the rule of the feminine, the moon, the feelings and intuition:

*Yet we still drag his tides.*

*His salt blood's subject*

*to the old spells of women*

*as to your own, Selene.*

*He fears the night, and still our music draws him.*

In the "Interference" sequence, the inherent dualism of human nature is seen as a consequence of evolution. Having left his mother element, man is now a creature of both the sea (intuition and emotion) and the land (the intellect). The dominant antithesis of the creative unconscious and conscious rational states is symbolised throughout the poetry by sleep (or dream) and waking, sea and land. In "Interface (I)", mist and sea signify a dimension to which man has access only in sleep or the dream-life of the imagination:

*Dreams: waves. Their mind-meandering changes*

*reach to the edge of shore, no further.*

*Their soft admonishing voices*

*sound from a sea where we can swim no longer.*

*Now we must wake.*

and this is conveyed not only by symbolism, but by the meandering lines, the humming and swishing sea-sounds of the various combinations of "s", "w", "m" and "n", and the lulling vowel sounds of this extract. In "Halfdream", the poet uses similar symbolism and similar effects to simulate the pattern of her own imaginative and emotional life. Like the old boat, she is moored to the land by a fraying rope, drawn by the ebb and flow of the water and the moon-road. The poem also suggests the unity of the mind with the elements and the creatures of night and water, and the inevitability of the final drift out towards darkness and death. "Dream" is far more vigorous than "Half-dream"; it suggests that the unconscious expresses the truth of life far more accurately than waking life, which is seen as a comfortable rationalization, the soothing of an infant by the parent:

*"No one is dying, nobody's being tortured*

*this is the real world and perfectly safe."*

Man can have access to this truth only in states of lowered consciousness - dream, intuition, vision- for the evolutionary process has betrayed him ("unfinned") to the daytime rational life ashore:

*Beached by the old betraying sea*

*I drag my body further,*

*crawl to my unfinned feet and dress and go.*

*("Interface (I)")*

and he is caught in the "cross-traffic" of antithetical ways of thought and the actions which stem from them. In the "Interface" sequence his plight is contrasted to that of the whale who, at the evolutionary crossroads, denied the call to progress up from the dark seas and regressed:

*Whales tried the land early,*

*didn't like it. Easy to slip back*

*into the mothering upholding element,  
be rocked again to half-sleep.*

*("Interface (II) ")*

This regression explains the whale's guilty impulse to suicide:

*This is where they choose their suicides.  
Dry harsh wind-battered beaches remind them  
of an unaccepted challenge; their  
old uneasy guilts  
over that failure.*

*("Interface (II)")*

Yet man "from the opposite direction", having accepted a challenge which he can't quite meet, is no better off. Humans too "come to their own extremes" and "take their own guilts / back to surrender". Because of his dualistic (amphibian) nature, there is no real answer for man. If there were, it is long since past, for he is now on the highroad which sweeps him on into a world of increasing inhumanity and violence ("By-pass") and the chance for a "U Turn" has been missed for ever. "By-pass" is over-allegorical, but its point is apposite. Because of the poet's clear recognition of man's dilemma, these are poems of acceptance. Modern man is, after all, the product of the Quaternary Age, an age of violent and contending forces:

*Quaternary Age that made me in your dream,  
fertile and violent, swung from ice to heat  
to flood to famine - what you've grafted in!  
Could I be calm when you are so extreme?*

*("Quaternary Age")*

and the poet not only accepts this, but delights in it:

*.. I'm still your child,  
adoring this sudden light, the gaps between  
terrors, the glow of cloud-tops, crevices  
of green serenity. Whimpering, half in love,  
I press on the armoured glass to watch  
you, lean to your diverse passages, asking  
what you mean by those mute and merciful designs of pearl.*

*("Quaternary Age")*

Part of this acceptance is the acceptance of love, and "Eve Sings" is a magnificent love lyric, informed and strengthened by an acceptance of the imperfection of love. The keyword is "human", and its full implications are defined by the old Edenic symbols: serpent, crossed swords, Eden, the tree, and a doomed world. Against the full knowledge of guilt, failure and betrayal, the poet sets the "greed and joy" of love, for still "... the tree / drops one last fruit for you and me". In "Eve Scolds", the implications of being "human" are further developed, for the individual woman, Eve and mother earth are identified and opposed to the active, rapacious male principle:

*.. so entrepreneurial, vulgarly moreish, plunging on and exploring where there's nothing left to explore, exhausting the last of our flesh.*

The two impulses - creative (female) and imperialistic (male) - are clearly incompatibles:

*But you and I, at heart, never got on.*

*Each of us wants to own -*

*You, to own me, but even more, the world;*

*I, to own you.*

As always, the female impulse is to surrender:

*I go overboard for you,*

*here at the world's last edge.*

*Ravage us still; the very last green's our kiss.*

The witty colloquialisms- "I go overboard" and "the world's last edge" - suggest that the surrender to male domination is suicidal but inevitable, and the poem's irony is light and humorous, in keeping with the title.

Age is more difficult to accept, and the narcissistic young woman in the orchard (Eve again?)[1] who "kneels / to love her body in the pool/ and dream herself for ever young" confronts instead her *alter ego*, herself grown old, the witch who "steals / not the flesh but the joy of it":

*Look down, you fool;*

*the witch is watching from the pool*

*to make you what you will be*

*and poison what you are.*

There are chilling implications in the poem, for the series of changing time perspectives as the feminine figure confronts herself at different stages of development calls the very basis of identity into question, and the figure of the artist who stands outside yet manipulates the perspectives is ambivalent, yet the tone is once again light and these implications should perhaps not be taken too seriously. "Moving South" is more serious and less complex, for moving south, closer towards the pole, is a metaphor for divesting oneself of the fleshly extravagance of "summer" existence- an extravagance which is, after all, a cheating enchantment ("*Beaute de diable*") in order to approach the essence of experience; not only the "root's endurance" which the poet has been stressing throughout her work, but also the waiting winter and death.

In *Fourth Quarter* Judith Wright returns to a number of old themes with a new vigour and often in a completely new context, demonstrating control, detachment, and a mastery of her material. In "The Dark Ones", for instance, the aboriginals are identified with the dark and potent contents of the unconscious. They rise up like wraiths to confound and reproach the confidence and assurance of the daylight world:

*In the town on pension day*

*mute shadows glide.*

*The 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.*

The aboriginals are the shadow side of the self; to deny them is analogous to a denial of part of the self:

*Something leaks in our blood*

*like the ooze from a wound...*

*The night ghosts of a land*

*only by day possessed*

*come haunting into the mind*

*like a shadow cast.*

Like the Jungian shadow, the aboriginals must be brought up into the consciousness, accepted and assimilated, before the shame and guilt of the white race can be healed. This is a significant and moving poem; to me quite as powerful as the early "Bora Ring" and "Nigger's Leap, New England", for it relates the immediate racial problem to the deepest levels of the psyche, of feeling and intuition, of repressed guilt and shame which, like the "dark ones" of the poem, is denied at our own risk.

In *Fourth Quarter* there are a number of poems which appear on first sight to be simply descriptive of nature, examples of that reverence for nature and concern for its uniqueness which the poet has always advocated. These poems are not a return to an earlier mode (for instance the complex symbolism of many earlier poems), but a new departure, for by imitative form, and subtle modulations in linguistic texture, the poet captures the visual, tactile, and even the kinetic quality of the subject. She thus avoids, as far as possible, the propensity of symbolism to humanize nature and, by mimesis, captures the individuality of the natural form. In "The Eucalypt and the National Character", for instance, the long and flexible, broken yet springy rhythms effectively imitate the sprawling and informal / even dishevelled, disorderly landscape:

*Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,*

*she leaves herself plenty of margin. Nothing is stiff,*

*symmetrical, indispensable. Everything bends*

*whip-supple, pivoting, loose..*

In "Case-moth" too the texture of the language captures the visual form, the movement and the life-quality of this particular organism:

*Homespun, homewoven pod,*

*case-moth wears a clever web.*

*Sloth-grey, slug-slow,*

*slung safe in a sad-coloured sack,*

*a twig-camouflaged bedsock,*

*shifts from leaf to next leaf;*

*lips life at a bag-mouth.*

"Swamp Plant" and "Encounter" are similarly impressive. These poems however are not simply examples of imitative form: each has a major point to make. "Case-moth", for instance, conveys the tenacity of life and the cautious subterfuges required for survival, and suggests that such caution stunts the life of the moth ("Inside, your wings wither") and, by extension to the human sphere, the life of the imagination. The termite queen too (in the poem of that name) is both valid on a naturalistic level, and a superb indigenous symbol for the generative feminine principle (thus tying the poem to the central theme of the volume):

*Now gross and tended,  
the clay-red temple's centre,  
still she pours out  
her milky stream of slaves.  
She is nursery, granary, industry,  
army and agriculture.  
Her swollen motionless tissues  
rule every tentacle.*

Meanwhile the predatory echidna symbolises the threat to the dark generative world of nature and the dark world of the unconscious - by the daylight forces of philistinism and rationalism. This is a feature of *Fourth Quarter*, that the indigenous creatures - whale, platypus, termite queen, and echidna - are transmuted into resonant symbols without any betrayal of their unique Australian quality. The balance between inner and outer is exquisite, particularly in the case of the platypus; while the whale, the waterinhabiting air-breathing mammal, is a wholly appropriate analogue for man's dualistic psyche. Throughout this volume symbolism is a finely integrated structural feature, exemplified not only by the basic symbolic dualisms which dominate the volume (darkness and light, water and land, dream and waking, male and female), but by the symbolism of individual poems; for instance the sequence "bitter", "lemon" and "shiver" in the title poem, which sustains the astringency of the poet's wry acceptance.

Irony and humour are a feature of *Fourth Quarter*, and a number of Judith Wright's serious preoccupations are satirised here. In "At Cedar Creek", for instance, the poet seeks a "formula" for poetry in a satiric "schema" which parodies her previous concern with primitivism, with language, and with myth:

*Complex ritual connections  
between Culture and Nature  
are demonstrated by linguistic studies.  
The myths of primitive people  
can reveal codes  
we may interpret..  
Religions suppress the decays of time  
and relate the Conscious  
to the Unconscious (collective).  
Metaphorical apprehensions  
of the relations of deities, men and animals  
can be set out in this schema.*

Meanwhile in the superb "Creation - Annihilation" the previously sacred creative act is treated with irreverent irony. Creation is no longer the linguistic feat of man, but the work of a jubilant and playful God who, with untidy gusto, scatters his "mudscraps and sparks of light" everywhere to the bewilderment of men:

*Notes from his hand's delight  
crowded earth, water, air,  
too small, it seemed, for care;*

*too small for Adam's eye  
when all the names began.  
None of the words of man  
reached lower than the Fly.*

The importance of Anthony van Leeuwenhoek in the context of this poem is not only that he discovered minute forms of life previously *un-named* by man and thus considered not to exist (for instance bacteria), but that he established the basic unity on the level of sexual generation of man, fleas, weevils and other "scraps and huslement(s)" of the Creation - hence man's insecurity; he is no longer "Favourite Child"! In its wit, sheer energy, and virtuosity, this poem is quite different from anything that Judith Wright has written before. This versatility is displayed to a lesser extent in other poems of *Fourth Quarter* such as "Counting in Sevens" which has the surface simplicity of a child's counting rhyme, yet is a moving recapitulation of the poet's emotional life-story.

This is not to suggest that the poet's control of tone is always sure. Her description of the Canberra sky, for instance, is startling and grotesque:

*Tiny invisible midges  
draw over it  
snail-trails  
of glistening snot.  
Day  
why don't you wipe your eye?*

*("Brief Notes on Canberra: iii Military Aircraft")*

and the whole Canberra sequence is disappointing. Nevertheless, in *Fourth Quarter* all the positive themes of the earlier poetry are crystallised and expressed in poetry which, in most instances, demonstrates the poet's mental dexterity, her control of irony, and her versatility with language and form. Continuity, for instance, was a major thematic preoccupation in the earlier poetry. In *Fourth Quarter* continuity is no longer simply the physical continuity of the generation and the cycles of nature, but the expensive vision of the continuity of artistic endeavour, of the rage to create, and to transmute the flux into "immutable jade":

*Holding all skill and tradition, all times and eyes,  
feeling the chill of the poles of art, the blaze  
of its equator where the moment of making lies,  
all lives and visions our own; past nights and days  
my raging kin, we'd shape eternity  
into earth's image, make the unseen seen  
in forms of immutable jade.*

*("Envy")*

Meanwhile love is still, as it was in the earlier poetry, the creative principle itself, the urge to "celebrate lovelong / life's wholeness, spring's return, the flesh's tune ("Unpacking Books"). "For M.R." is a superb example of this celebration:

*All summer the leaves grow dense, the water-lilies  
push up arrowhead after arrowhead,*

*burst into smoke-blue, hit the central gold,  
and then retract themselves into bulb and mud.  
Coming round the world, another season begins.*

The old fears- time, evil, death and personal failure - do not matter in this context, for "the arrow sprung to the target, / the shaft trembling in the central gold" is a rare event for any poet- "more than once is luck". At the same time there is always the possibility of "reaching the highest power of what we've been" ("Envy"), and it seems to me that, in the poems of *Fourth Quarter*, Judith Wright has once again done just this. There has always been a point of growth in her vision, and she has followed her vision and the conflict inherent in it through to that sense of acceptance and of fulfilment which she celebrates in "Growingpoint" - one of the finest poems in this latest volume:

*Breadth, form, completion- those depend  
upon a proper symmetry.  
The length of branch, the stance in space,  
what leaf and fruit tree can sustain  
dispose around a central strain.  
I know no word for growing-point,  
but in myself the sapling rose,  
an aim, a need, a sleep to air;  
where weighted, rounded, bough on bough  
the tree fills out its limits now.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There may be a reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, k. IV, 11.456-68.

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