

SHIRLEY P. WALKER: A Note on Sense-Perception in the Poetry of Judith Wright

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The study of a number of Judith Wright's poems dealing with perception reveals a changing attitude towards the significance of sense-data. This is highly relevant to the poet's craft and her philosophical development.

In one of her earliest poems, "Sonnet", sense-perception is seen as an incessant process, the "laborious focus" of eyes and brain which accumulates material for later meditation. "The Maker" has particular relevance to the poet's art. This lyric deals with the poet's unique power to synthesise sense-data into song. In "GumTrees Stripping", on the other hand, sense-perception is but one part of a two-way process. Wisdom constitutes a simultaneous awareness of visual data and its underlying significance. The poem itself is a fine example of this totality of apprehension. "Vision" is seen as the culmination of a trend away from the revelation of truth through sense-perception. In this poem the visible world is rejected outright as a distorted mask of a "real" world, veiled by human imperfection. This marks a progressive move towards a Platonic view of reality. Each view of the function of perception is seen to be relevant to the poet's art and development.

In the first poem, "Sonnet", sense-data is seen as the raw material for meditation, and perhaps for poetry. Wisdom, "the word that... shall compass more than speech", is attained in a visionary state when the "long commentary of the brain" upon the fluid continuum of sensory perception is silenced. As evening overtakes the earth there is a momentary stilling of complicated life and movement, thus providing an ideal condition for this synthesis:

*Evening and earth are one,
and bird and tree are simple and stand still.*

The quiet movement of the poem mirrors the simultaneous shift from evening to nightfall, and from outer to inner perception. There is a calm and assured balancing of light and shadow; sense-perception and thought. This fine balance is reinforced by a sense of precarious achievement—the "fragile heart" and "perilous self won hardly out of clay" are the instruments which are to transmute the golden harvest of sense-impression into wisdom. The poem gives a sense of ripeness and repletion which is focused in the harvest imagery and reinforced by the texture of the verse. Nevertheless the poem is flawed by vagueness and a lack of differentiation between the functions of the sense-organ (eye), the interpreting faculty (brain), the heart and self. The "dream" of the last line is also insufficiently defined. The poem, however, is notable for its Wordsworthian tenor and attitude. Nature is seen as a fertile field of sense-data which is stored up for the meditative imagination to reflect upon in tranquillity, and "Sonnet" is chiefly interesting as a record of this process of absorption.

"The Maker", published three years later, establishes a powerful link between sensory perception and poetry. The poet is the intermediary; her sense is the "crystal" in which all empirical data is synthesised and transmuted into song:

*All things that glow and move,
all things that change and pass,
I gather their delight*

*as in a burning-glass;
all things I focus in
the crystal of my sense.
I give them breath and life
and set them free in the dance.*

The creative process is symbolised by the fierce energy of fire and its transforming power. The poet's vision is burned clear by love, and she, "like a burning glass" directs sense-data into a fiery focus which transmutes it into poetry. The poem surpasses "Sonnet" in the vividness and energy of its symbolism, and the manner in which it enacts its own meaning. As it speaks of the process, it is at work transforming experience into poetry.

"Gum-Trees Stripping" represents an advance in the poet's attitude towards perception. Once again the poem's freshness and immediacy arise from direct experience. A simple natural phenomenon, the seasonal stripping down of the gumtrees' bark, is used to exemplify a right response to the world of sense. Scientific rationalisation of natural process is first rejected:

*Say the need's born within the tree,
and waits a trigger set for light;
say sap is tidal like the sea,
and rises with the solstice-heat -*

This is speculative, and denies the miraculous which science is powerless to explain. Intellectual comparisons which project the superficialities of human behaviour onto nature are next rejected:

*Words are not meanings for a tree.
So it is truer not to say,
"These rags look like humility,
or this year's wreck of last year's love,
or wounds ripped by the summer's claw."*

These surface similes constitute a humanisation rather than a spiritualisation of nature. They are a misuse of man's unique comparative ability; and a misuse of language. True wisdom, the apprehension of the totality of the event, is achieved by the simultaneous fusion of sense perception and a deep intuitive sense of significance which is beyond the strained use of simile. The poem is its own best example, and what it has to say about perception is enacted in the metaphors with which the poet both describes the gum-tree, and implies other planes of significance:

*but wisdom shells the words away
to watch this fountain slowed in air
where sun joins earth-to watch the place
at which these silent rituals are
.....
Wisdom can see the red, the rose,
the stained and sculptured curve of grey,
the charcoal scars of fire, and see*

around that living tower of tree
the hermit tatters of old bark
split down and strip to end the season:

These metaphors are subsurface and completely integrated within the description. They do not work by intellectual comparison, but by a deep awareness of the multidimensional significance of experience. The tree is first of all seen as a "fountain slowed in air / where sun joins earth", thus emphasising the unity of all elements in a composition which is almost a stylised art-form, while "sculptured" carries an unobtrusive sense of the master-hand at work. Meanwhile the fundamental correspondence between natural process and religious ritual is established. The gumtrees enact a silent ritual; the "hermit tatters of old bark" suggest a necessary solitude and withdrawal from the world; while "charcoal scars of fire" imply the suffering demanded by natural process. Meanwhile "living tower" defines the grandeur and magnificence of natural growth which, it is implied, is superior to human architecture. Thus the poem operates on two levels-concrete particularity apprehended by the senses, and an intuitive sense of significance. Both levels are completely integrated.

This integration is not necessarily effortless. In "Nameless Flower", the poet defines the illusory nature of sense experience:

Word and word are chosen and met.
Flower, come in.
But before the trap is set,
The prey is gone.

In "For Precision", she speaks of the difficulty of synthesising sensory experience and significance. She prays for the strength and certainty of the natural world. Only when she can be "sure and economical as the rayed / suns, stars, flowers, wheels" can she speak with a "pure voice" that "joins all, gives all a meaning, makes all whole". The interaction between the phenomenal world and the poet's consciousness is defined in "Interplay":

What is within becomes what is around.
This angel morning on the world-wide sea
is seared with light that's mine and comes from me,
and I am mirror to its blaze and sound,
as lovers double in their interchange.

The subconscious, too, is involved in this interaction, and the resulting poem can transcend both its maker and the sense experience from which it was woven. In "Five Senses" she sees:

all sounds and silences,
all shape and colour
as thread for that weaver,
whose web within me growing
follows beyond my knowing
some pattern sprung from nothing -
a rhythm that dances
and is not mine.

The phenomenal world is a constant point of reference in Judith Wright's poetry. Poems such as "The Conch Shell", "The Cycads", "Phaius Orchid" and "Wildflower Plain" take natural sense-data as their starting point, then proceed to an abstraction of truth. Her poetry is the record of a continuous search for this underlying truth, which becomes more and more separated from the actuality of sense-perception. In "The Forest" she states:

*My search is further.
There's still to name and know
beyond the flowers I gather
the one that does not wither -
the truth from which they grow.*

There is a tendency, too, to abandon concrete particularity in favour of symbols such as lion, pool, star and wolf, which are abstracted from nature and invested with a supernatural significance. In much of Judith Wright's later poetry, she wholly rejects the sensible world for the world of ideas or vision. This is both an ingoing and an outgoing process. The mind rejects sense-data as a source of significance, but projects its personal, almost idiosyncratic vision outward upon the world of being. The poem "Vision" crystallises this tendency. In this poem there is a total rejection of the objects of sense-perception. These are seen as a distortion of reality. Behind this distortion lies the ideal, and true vision is the flame-like force which will reveal it:

*He who once saw that world beyond the world,
so that each tree and building, stone and face
cracked open like a mask before a flame
and showed the tree, the stone, the face behind it -
walked forever with that beatification.*

True vision, an awareness of the interpenetration of the human and the divine, is a universal birthright, "what the human eye was meant to see", yet is veiled by human failing ("pride, greed and ignorance"). False intellect is once again rejected. The tool of pride, it stands in the way of visionary perception. He who has a true vision of reality views humanity with the compassionate knowledge that all men have meaning in relation to the world of eternal values:

*So he was sad for victim and oppressor,
for crying child and brute with the slack mouth,
for schemer, clod and safe respectable man
and all who had not seen what he had seen.*

The poem is notable for its total rejection of the shifting and impermanent world of sense-perception; for its awareness of a "second" world where men stand up "real behind the masks of hatred". The man of vision, the surrogate for the poet, has the vital myth-making faculty. Good and evil are projected onto mythological abstractions and men are "the instruments in some high battle / where God incomprehensibly warred on God". The higher reality is indefinite at this stage, but in other later poems, the poet's vision becomes more explicitly Platonic. In "To Hafiz of Shiraz", she combines her earlier delight in the natural world of sense-perception with a full recognition of the world of Platonic idealism which lies beyond it:

*Now that I know that each star has its path, each bird
is finally feathered and grown in the unbroken shell,
each tree in the seed, each song in the life laid down -*

*is the night sky any less strange; should my glance less follow the flight;
should the pen shake less in my hand?*

*No, more and more like a birth looks the scheduled rising of Venus
the turn of a wing in the wind more startles my blood.*

*Every path and life leads one way only,
out of continual miracle, through creation's fable,
over and over repeated but never yet understood,
as every word leads back to the blinding original Word.*

This integration of the world of sense-data and the world of vision marks the culmination of Judith Wright's treatment of perception.

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