

Judith Wright: from *The Moving Image* to *Fourth Quarter*

Judith Wright published eleven volumes of poetry; *The Moving Image* (1946) was the first, appearing when she was thirty one. It's an astonishing collection, mature in its voice and assured in its methods, both personal and social in subject matter and the outlook expressed, or offered as sharing-points by the writer to her readers. If I had to nominate the most notable feature of the book, I would say that it is the writer's certainty that her viewpoints will be available, accessible, to her readers; this requires confidence, certainty in the language being used, and this comes most easily to people sure in their social class. Wright came from a family that had been adventurous in Australian settlement, and even, occasionally, successful. In an earlier essay in this series ('Judith Wright: the basis of our nation? *The Generations of Men* (1959) and its themes reconsidered in *The Cry for the Dead* (1981)', I referred to the way in which Wright described her family's pioneering in New South Wales and Queensland, then, twenty years later, revised what she'd previously said in order to do justice to the aboriginal people's experiences of the same happenings. This was an extraordinary revision of her family's story. In writing about Judith Wright's poetry, I want to take a similar early-and-late approach, from *The Moving Image*, with its confidence, its way of dealing with the things it talks about, to her last three published collections: *Alive* (1973), *Fourth Quarter* (1976), and *Phantom Dwellings* (1985). I'm aware that this beginning-and-end approach will cause exclusions in my way of looking at her work, but I'm hoping that it will allow some

contrasts to be clearly shown by stepping over the stages where they developed their intermediate forms. *The Moving Image*, then, and the work of Wright's later years.

Writing about poetry is more difficult than writing about prose. Most of us are only capable of writing in prose about poetry, using one level of expression to deal with another. The OED, I notice, says of poetry that it is 'the expression of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination, or feeling, in appropriate language, such language containing a rhythmical element and having usually a metrical form' (1581). Notice that word 'elevated'; this is high art talking about itself, something that's out of fashion today, and no longer easy to find. Alas, say I, but I notice that I'm not a crowd! There's something almost insulting to poetry in talking about it in prose. Good poetry expresses itself so clearly and so well that explication is not only unnecessary, it's as fundamentally stupid as asking someone to 'explain' what Shakespeare meant when he wrote certain lines from *Hamlet*, after which we're offered something untranslatable like 'To be or not to be'. Explain! Explanations are impossibly flawed, or perhaps just impossible. I will try to restrict myself to comments which I think can be made usefully, even helpfully, and I'll try to make any quotations from Judith Wright's poetry as long and/or complete as I can. I do recommend, however, that you have her books beside you as you read so you are not compelled by any argument of mine to restrict your knowledge of her work.

Where shall we start? I've already spoken of *The Moving Image*, but I think the two ends are best approached from the point that divides them, right in the middle. With two poems from *Alive*, one short enough to quote in full, one so long that I can only offer bits. Both relate, I think, to the death of Jack McKinney, Wright's partner of many years. She seems to have been one of those people so well-married that she only ever married once, and, having lost her partner, never gave much thought to partnering someone else. The loss of Jack caused her to think about the house they'd shared, and the house turns itself into the life they lived together. 'Habitat' is the first poem in her 1973 collection.

You and I, house
are in our fifties;
time now to pause
and look at each other.

She does so for pages, in tiny, short lines, minimal verse.

Bed
you are dressed
meekly in white
like a bride

All day
you wait
silent
for night to undo you.

There are twelve more verses as tight as this, then she returns to her start.

Bed
you are dressed
strangely
in white like a bride.

'Meekly', 'strangely'; the sparsity of the words makes us aware of the change in wording; Wright is always economical but this is an extreme that's appropriate because her implied subject, or perhaps the reason why she's talking to and about her house is because it's empty now. It still contains Judith Wright, poet, but not the partnership that sustained her. The building is a character with a life of its own, and it's not unique.

All
houses crumble or
fall
to the wrecker's tool:
wall from wall;
or burn
one tall rage of fire like a tree.
And I remember one,
stilted high,
white-ant riddled, unsound.
Winds knocked it to one knee,
then with a year-long
sigh
it settled to the ground.
One old man lived there
obstinately.
We saw the smoke rise still
from its wry chimney

till
he had to leave. Or die.
How will it be,
House, with you and me?

Now, by way of concluding this introductory mid-point of Wright's career, I want to quote the whole of a poem which needs no explanation. It's called 'Finale'.

The cruellest thing they did
was to send home his teeth from the hospital.
What could she do with those,
arriving as they did days after the funeral?

Wrapped them in one of his clean handkerchiefs
she'd laundered and taken down.
All she could do was cradle them in her hands;
they looked so strange, alone –

utterly jawless in a constant smile
not in the least like his. She could cry no more.
At midnight she took heart and aim and threw
them out of the kitchen-door.

It rocketed out, that finally parted smile,
into the gully? the scrub? the neighbour's land?
And she went back and fell into stupid sleep,
knowing him dead at last, and by her hand.

'Dead at last, and by her hand.' She doesn't analyse this acceptance of responsibility. It won't stand analysis, probably, but she makes the reader accept that it has to be accepted. Throwing

out the belongings of the dead is hard, as many readers will know. If we are to go on, we must enact some banishment of the departed. If we elect to go on, we are saying, whether we care to admit it or not, that we can go on without the person now missing. This doesn't make grief hypocritical, it simply says that it has limits.

My space too is limited, so, having established a middle for Judith Wright's career, I'll begin to look on either side of it. She had found her partner, as no doubt her family had expected of her, and she'd lost him. She expected it of herself that she would go on alone, and she did. Her later writing is different from her early writing. Let's now go back to the beginning, or rather to an early moment in her career, December 1959, when Wright edited 'Poetry 1959', a Current Affairs Bulletin, a publication of the University of Sydney which a few readers may still remember (or am I showing my age?). It's a tiny little brochure, but it holds poems by twenty poets, and a brief introduction in which Wright says this:

... I shall choose to generalise by saying that most of our poets, both old and young, (with a few obvious exceptions) share at least one characteristic: they are more likely to choose the colloquial than the decorative in language, to use the immediate image than the image mediated by religion or literature or even history; that is, they are likelier to attack their subject directly than by implication or subtlety. This is perhaps the result of our traditionalism, of our tendency to work as individuals rather than in groups; of our youth, in short. And perhaps this very immediacy of approach is the reason for our poetry's being considered either vital or naïve, exciting or provincial, according to the taste of the reviewer. In contrast with the poetry of older countries, our

writers sometimes seem to be looking at, and trying to find language for, their subject as though no one else had treated that subject before. Ours is a poetry without echoes.

In case that sounds restrictive, I'll add a few more lines from the end of the piece.

The fact is that our poetry is in some sense a wholly indigenous product, and the critics who would like it to strike a note of deeper involvement, of greater sophistication, do not seem, judging by the work of our younger poets, to be having much effect so far. But, to think a little deeper into the subject, may it not be that the only real maturity lies in striking out one's own line, remaining faithful to one's own experience? If so, I think it may quite well be that Australian poetry is beginning to become mature.

That was 1959; here are the poets Judith Wright included in her survey for the Current Affairs Bulletin. In order, they were James McAuley, John Blight, Vincent Buckley, A.D.Hope, John Gooday, David Martin, Geoffrey Dutton, Nan McDonald, David Campbell, Max Harris, Douglas Stewart, Randolph Stow, J.R.Rowland, Ian Mudie, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Laurence Collinson, Thomas W.Shapcott, W.Hart-Smith, Rosemary Dobson and Christopher Koch. Those were her fellows, selected in 1959; who stands beside her now? Many hundreds, no doubt, for our poetry has rather more echoes today (2009) than it did fifty years ago, and why? Because poets, Judith Wright included, have kept at their work and, though they may have been ignored, or pushed aside by the writers of song-lyrics, not to mention those verse- and thought-

substitutes known as advertising slogans, they have written their poetry, guiding the muddy rivers of our thought by the clearest and most eloquent statements they've been able to make. One has only to reflect on a few pages of poetry to realise how hard it is to make good statements, how much work goes into producing a few eloquent lines, and how much they're needed by a population that's forever presiding over the floodwaters of daily usage. Language is spread abroad like silt by all of us, and poets are one of our means of keeping the language clarified in order to keep it potable, useful, meaningful, viable ... or what you will. Here's how Judith Wright starts *The Moving Image*:

Here is the same clock that walked quietly
through those enormous years I half recall,
when between one blue summer and another
time seemed as many miles as round the world,
and world a day, a moment or a mile,
or a sweet slope of grass edged with the sea,
or a new song to sing, or a tree dressed in gold –
time and the world that faster spin until
mind cannot grasp them now or heart take hold.

'Only the sound of the clock is still the same', she says, and a few lines further on:

And the clock begins to race.
We are caught in the endless circle of time and star
that never chime with the blood; we weary, we grow lame,
stumbling after their incessant pace
that slackens for us only when we are
caught deep in sleep, or music, or a lover's face.

Judith Wright was a woman of the twentieth century and one of the limitations the century imposed on those who lived in it was the perceived limitations of those apparently – but were they? – limitless concepts of time and space. In that sense the death of Jack McKinney may have been, strange as it may seem, a release of a certain sort, because the world had done its worst and her problem was what to do with the time remaining. She put that question to herself, and had an answer. Here's 'To Mary Gilmore', and again it's from 'Alive; Poems 1971-72':

Having arranged for the mail and stopped the papers,
tied loaves of bread Orlando-like to the tree,
love-messages for birds; suitcase in hand
I pause and regard the irony of me.

Supposed to be fifty-six, hair certainly grey,
stepping out much like sixteen on another journey
through a very late spring, the conference-papers packed
as a half-excuse for a double-tongued holiday;

as though I believed – well, then, as though I believed.
Remember Mary Gilmore, her little son
turned sixty-four, and bald? And Mary playing
her poet's game as though she'd never be done.

This is my place. It isn't far to my grave,
The waiting stone. But still there's life to do
And a taste of spring in the air. Should I sit and grieve,
Mary, or keep the ink running, like you?

Years have their truths, and each as true as another.
Salute, Mary. Not long now till we know

the blackened deathly world you once foresaw;
but now – let's live. I pick up my case and go.

Feeling humbled, I pick up Judith's case for her, and go – in the opposite direction, to a world at war. *The Moving Image* is full of it. Here's a verse from 'The Company of Lovers':

Death marshals up his armies round us now.
Their footsteps crowd too near.
Lock your warm hand above the chilling heart
and for a time I live without my fear.
Grove in the night to find me and embrace,
for the dark preludes of the drums begin,
and round us, round the company of lovers,
Death draws his cordons in.

It's intensely personal and yet it's generalised, for war has much the same effects on all whose nations are taking part. War is a framework for feeling, intensifying it, providing, also, a context for the innumerable judgements that people have to make in order to manage their emotional lives in a time when life itself is in disorder. Perspectives don't last. Events far beyond our control make it possible or impossible to do things we fancy. Fancies themselves live endangered lives; warlike ones are put to use, reputations are made, heroes and villains define themselves, and all the other amazing things that happen when war gets loose. The first verse of 'The Trains':

Tunnelling through the night, the trains pass
in a splendour of power, with a sound like thunder
shaking the orchards, waking
the young from a dream, scattering like glass

the old men's sleep; laying
a black trail over the still bloom of the orchards.
The trains go north with guns.

Notice that the word 'orchards' occurs twice in that first stanza; it occurs again in the second and third, four times in a poem of twenty lines. I doubt if this was a calculated effect; rather, I think, a natural corrective forcing its way in to re-establish something Wright felt needed to be there. I think we may take the repeated use of the word 'orchards' as the writer's heart wanting to reassert itself in any way possible.

We cannot leave the theme of war without referring to 'To A.H., New Year, 1943', a poem of forty-five lines, which is longish for Judith Wright. A.H., whoever he may have been, is dead as the poet writes, his 'scattered bones rolled on the chill floors of the shallow Baltic'. The poet wants 'to make peace with the remembrance of the insistent dead', and does so in a way that accords with the world of the pastoralist family of which Wright was a part.

Having you in my mind, this new year's eve,
I would resolve my mind upon this faith,
finding a meaning in annihilation.
Since blood has been your gift, let me accept it,
remembering that for spring's resurrection
some sacrifice was always necessary.
Osiris, Christ; your flesh broken like bread
will be the rite that marks the heart's rebirth.
These wearied fields, made fertile by your blood,
will bear some richer harvest. Let the year begin
and bring with it the autumn, the time of sowing.

It's interesting to observe that this ritual of acceptance, of peace-making with the spirit of A.H., to some extent contradicts Judith Wright's remarks of 1959 about images not being 'mediated by religion or literature or even history'; her confident use of the names of Osiris and Christ struck me as being amazingly forceful when I first read the poem in 1954 and feels as strong today. It is a post-Enlightenment way of seeing that she offers us. We're invited to revert, as it were, for a time to the ways of thinking of Christians or even early Egyptians as a *means* to reach the state of acceptance which one feels is present in the poet's mind for reasons which have little enough to do with either or both of the divinities mentioned. The healing, as I read the poem, comes eventually from the autumn and the sowing it brings, that is from the earth and its seasons, rather than from the numinous powers she names. I say this with some confidence because another poem in this collection, 'For New England' ends with a similar invocation of the land:

Wind, blow through me
till the nostalgic candles of laburnum
fuse with the dogwood in a single flame
to touch alight these sapless memories.
Then will my hand turn sweetly from the plough
and all my pastures rise as green as spring.

Judith Wright was a woman of the land, and the land of certain parts of a certain country, and she had the down-to-earthness we associate with people of the land (the word 'pastoral' changed its meaning between England and Australia), and she could also find the whimsies and delicacies of a way of life she knew from every direction. I refer to the incomparable 'South of My Days', which

I won't quote here, having done so elsewhere in my writings: but turn to it, dear reader, turn to it and gasp, that she could, when still so young, write the anthem of a way of life that had fed into, and helped create, her own. You remember how it ends?

South of my days' circle
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

There are not so very many poems in *The Moving Image* but they all have effect; we notice the aboriginal people, missing now, in 'Bora Ring' and 'Half-caste Girl'; the tender recall of 'Soldier's Farm'; and the contrast, another part of her country's history, between the disinherited spendthrift and the squire, his brother, in 'Remittance Man', where the formal roses of an English garden contrast with the heat and dust of the Australian outback. Wright's own inheritance had given her access to much of Australia's history, the pastoral aspects of it at least, and the confidence to bring it to life with that easy ownership which is part of the way of rural people, perhaps anywhere in the world, but certainly in our country.

After *The Moving Image* Wright gave us *Woman to Man* (1959) and the changes were upon her. Several other volumes followed, with a variety of forms of endeavour and experimentation, and then, as I said earlier, her way of living was changed when she lost Jack McKinney, her husband. 'Habitat' again:

When we first came
the house seemed too big,
then too small,
then too big again.

When I'm alone
it creaks like footsteps.

Houses and bodies
have memories, but forget.
Things drop through cracks,
mice chew old letters.

But worse things happen than that, and the older Judith Wright wanted to save the world from environmental ruination, and from the madness of its nuclear abilities. 'Geology Lecture':

"We need some knowledge of the rocks beneath ..."
Oh yes indeed, oh yes, indeed we do.
The furnace of an old volcanic breath
survives and culminates in me and you.

"The Lower Paleozoic muds and sands
laid down five hundred million years ago
contain few fossils." Life's obscure commands
direct our blood, still salt from far below.

'Sea-lily stems, some radiolaria,
and vegetation unidentified ..."
We feel complacent. How evolved we are
Who stare down knowingly at lens and slide!

"The horizontal layers gently fold;
the sediments consolidate to shale.
The last Ice Age ..." A reminiscent cold
shivers our spines as we absorb the tale.

"During the Cainozoic lava-flows
these ranges were built up." They wear away.

We perch upon them now in half a dozen
sitting with gently folded hands today;

containing all prehistory in our bones
and all geology behind the brain
which in the Modern age could melt these stones
so fiercely, time might never start again.

A number of poems in the three last books are fired with the same fierce prophesy. In 'Interface (III)', she starts off talking about whales:

Whales die of a sort of madness:
They choose their own beaching.
Watch them come in like liners
under deranged captains.

Before long she's enlarged her argument:

If you mourn its choice, remember,
not only whales have made it.
Whole peoples, countries, nations
have died in the same way.
Galaxies may be strewn
with staring burned-out planets
which took that path.

But this is to mourn a whale –
only a whale.

And so her poem ends, asserting one thing, having punched it into us that the opposite is likely to happen if we don't modify

our behaviour as a species. This was a way of thinking that wasn't available when Wright was thirty-one; destruction could be ascribed, when the world was at war with itself, to the enemies of our nation. Hostilities move, however, in a world at peace, inside humanity's minds. We can see ourselves, at last, as being our own worst enemies. When the Wrights began to settle in New South Wales and central-southern Queensland, the circumstances surrounding them – not to speak of the black people – were arduous enough to provide enormous challenges to be overcome. Judith Wright greatly admired her grandmother for operating first one, then two, properties on that tableland she remembered with such affection in 'South of My Days'. If you struggle, as the Wrights struggled, you struggle against something. War is similar in this; you have an enemy. Life is simpler when there is an enemy, more easily understood. Goods and bads are more easily allocated. Identified. Virtues are found in struggle, and goals can be set – to overcome! One of the things we can say about the poems in *The Moving Image* is that they stand separately from each other. Resonate together as they may, there's nothing in them compelling us to read each of them as an extension of the others. This is no longer true in the last three collections, where the vision has unified considerably and one poem sends our minds off to the others before and after it in the same book. I think we can see this clearly in 'For a Pastoral Family', in *Phantom Dwelling*. Part 1 is addressed 'to my brothers':

Over the years, horses have changed to land-rovers.
Grown old, you travel your thousands of acres
deploring change and the wickedness of cities
and the cities' politics; hoping to pass to your sons

a kind of life you inherited in your generation.
Some actions of those you vote for stick in your throats.
There are corruptions one cannot quite endorse;
but if they are in our interests, then of course ...

Well, there are luxuries still,
including pastoral silence, miles of slope and hill,
the cautious politeness of bankers. These are owed
to the forerunners, 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.

Our people who gnawed at the fringe
of the edible leaf of this country
left you a margin of action, a rural security,
and left to me
what serves as a base for poetry,
a doubtful song that has a dying fall.

She could hardly state her position more clearly. She goes on,
in the next section of the same poem, to say:

The really deplorable deeds
had happened out of our sight, allowing us innocence.
We were not born, or there was silence kept.

This, of course, was the silence which Judith Wright herself disrupted
when she replaced *The Generations of Men* with *The Cry for the Dead*
as her account of the lives of early settlers, her own family included.
Life taught Judith Wright a great deal, and she found the writing

of poetry got harder as the years went on. Sometimes, though, she
found something, as often as not drawn from many years earlier,
that could give her a spontaneous rush of feeling to unify a simple
statement: these are the late poems of Judith Wright which I think
are priceless. 'Smalltown Dance'; how could anything be more
insightful, more lovely than that? And if we go looking for last
words, they're there, delightfully in 'Counting in Sevens', cheekily
in 'Fourth Quarter', first poem in the book of the same name. If I
had to choose, and I do, then I would pick 'Wedding Photograph,
1913' as most representative of that ability Judith Wright achieved,
for she didn't really have it when she was thirty-one, to make a
simple statement of what I will call her state of being. It's about her
parents, that most important but hardest of all subjects for a writer
to write about; after all, what are we, in this world, and what do we
have to write about? We are a continuation of our parents, we are
a creation they've assisted in, and something which they've had to
accept because they couldn't by any means entirely shape us, and
we, in turn, have to find acceptance of them if we're to have any of
that peace within ourselves which we will need for our writing. In
accepting Judith Wright's parents as she gives them to us, we are
accepting her and those eleven vols of poetry which were her gift:
we can even join in for her final lines, speaking to her as she spoke
to them.

Ineloquent, side by side, this country couple
smiling confettied outside the family house –
he with his awkward faun-look, ears spread wide,
she with her downward conscious poise of beauty;

surrounded, wished-for, toasted by your clans
in the last threatening calm before the wars –
I look at you and wonder if I knew you.

Fathers and mothers enter an old pattern,
whoever they are; assume it for the children's
dependent and rebellious eyes. I see you
not through this amateur happy snapshot's sepias
but through the smell of a tweed shoulder sobbed-on,
through picnics, scoldings, moralities imparted
shyly, the sounds of songs at a piano -

through all I had to learn and unlearn,
absorb and fight against; through tears, then, better
remembered than through your love and kindnesses.
And she, pointing out birds or pansies' eyebrows,
gentle, fighting increasing pain – I know her
better from this averted girlish face
than in those moments death cut so short.

That was the most important thing she showed us –
that pain increases, death is final,
that people vanish. She never thought of that,
her second bridegroom, standing there invisible
on her right hand. Nor he of grief,
whose laughing easy look was furrowed later
by private and public matters. He lived long –

so long, I knew him well. Or so I thought;
But now I wonder. Here in this photograph
Stand two whom I can ponder. Let me join
That happy crowd of cousins, sisters, parents,

Brothers and friends. I lift a glass as well –
The grey-haired daughter whom you did not know.
The best of luck, young darlings.
Go on your honeymoon. Be happy always.