'A Kind of Aladdin Cave': Women, Space and Text in the Western Australian Novels of E.L. Grant Watson

ANGELINE O'NEILL, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

This paper traces the impact of E.L. Grant Watson's experiences in Western Australia on the development of his thought. The significance of these experiences is evidenced by a substantial selection of his published and unpublished fictional and non-fictional works, which date from his return to England from Australia in 1913 to his death in 1970. In this paper, however, I will be dealing with his first short story, 'Out There', and the Western Australian novels *The Partners* and *The Nun and the Bandit*, focusing in particular on his representations of the desert and bush landscapes as reflections of his fascination with what he described as 'the problems of the opposites'; opposition between male and female, between female and 'feminine', and between the civilised and primitive self. A self's presence and its power of interpretation, resulting in the transformation of topography into landscape, was central to Watson's writing, as he responded to his travels in his capacity as an artist, a trained biologist, amateur psychologist and self-proclaimed visionary. In defiance of what he saw as an increasingly materialistic and mechanistic society, he advocated the importance for contemporary humankind of realising the existence of an unseen realm beyond the physical world, and in his attempts to represent this realm he developed a myth of place, at the psychical and physical centre of which a Western (and invariably male) self exists.

While studying biology at Cambridge Watson met the anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, who invited him to join himself and Daisy Bates on an anthropological expedition to Western Australia. Here Watson first encountered the 'primitive animism' of the Aborigines. He endeavoured to understand its meaning in the pattern of his own life and for contemporary humankind in general through a series of short stories and novels, and his subsequent thinking was a curious amalgam of the beliefs of primitive and ancient cultures, Eastern and Western philosophy and Christian Gnosticism, with the ideas of Steiner and Jung. Effectively, then, his belief in the contemporary Western self as a sort of centre reconciled with its primitive origins, was a quasi-religious construct and the stuff of myth.

The Western Australian bush and in particular, the desert, became for Watson privileged places where the mystery of life was partly revealed, as the physical world and its boundaries became fluid and changing. Here he sought to transform land into landscape by 'participating' in rather than simply describing it, echoing Levy-Bruhl's notion of a participation mystique. Paradoxically, however, the self continued to exist at the centre of his landscapes, confounding his efforts to transcend the socio-political and epistemological restraints of Western consciousness. In his attempts to represent them he both domesticated and codified these landscapes. Invariably, the centre of his work involved the transformation of racial and sexual difference into moral and even metaphysical difference, a transformation which Abdul JanMohamed

sees as central to the imperial consciousness, since it enabled the continued separation of the European self from the other, who was invariably indigenous and/or female (JanMohamed 80).

Watson's short story 'Out There' is set on Karramatta, a cattle-station south of Wyndham in the remote Kimberley region. It tells of the struggles of an Englishman, Jefferies, to save himself from the influence of the landscape and from his own primitive instincts, aroused by the presence of several Aboriginal women. In what was to become a major concern in his fiction and non-fiction alike, a civilised self is confronted by the Aborigines and by the north-western wilderness. But as the years pass his initial resistance—even repugnance—turns to fascination, particularly with the indigenous women, whom he describes as 'enigmatic and bestial ... but attractive' (214) and who seem to embody the mystery of the landscape. Melodramatically, Jefferies must, he decides, 'possess' these women and their secrets. Through them he will penetrate the land, whose mystery is, he feels, identical to his own. So he takes one of the Aboriginal girls, whom he calls Mary, as his sexual partner. He is both attracted to and repulsed by her 'frankly sensual, natural and childish' demeanour and 'primitive and rather ugly' habits. Although Jefferies' acceptance of her suggests his desire to comprehend and control the untamed vastness of the North-West, in an example of Watson's racism Jefferies is represented still as the boss of the Aborigines; 'a wondrously powerful being, the owner of guns and other magical instruments' (216). Even when eventually he renounces civilisation, adopting the ways and beliefs of his Aboriginal companions, the narrator suggests that it is because he is Western and therefore superior that he is able to do so. At this point the mystery of the landscape is redefined and Jefferies seems to understand and be empowered by it. The bush is no longer foreign; psychically as well as physically he is at its centre.

Nevertheless, later in the story Jefferies chooses an Anglo-Australian bride, Miss Muriel Thornton. But everything about her—from her behaviour and opinions to her toiletries and wardrobe—seems mean-spirited; an indication of what Watson saw as the questionable 'greatness' of contemporary Western civilisation. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that shortly after their return to Karramatta, Jefferies comes across Muriel in a pool of blood. She has been battered to death, apparently by one of the Aboriginal women. Standing looking down at the corpse, Jefferies is aware of the intense stillness of the bush and the sound of the bull-roarers in the distance. The tribesmen, he believes, are 'speaking with their God: the God of the land' (225-6). So, instead of being appalled, he is overcome by a sense of harmony with his surroundings, and he passionately embraces one of his Aboriginal wives, Muriel's murderer. The story concludes here, implying that Jefferies has at last found his place in the mystery and silence of the wilderness.

Watson, like Jung, Levy-Bruhl, Steiner and so many others in the early part of this century, believed that a divine revelation had been given to primitive humankind and subsequently passed on between initiates of the mystery cults of the ancient world. Returning to this world in the desert and bush landscapes of Western Australia, he encountered what he was variously to describe as 'the unseen presence', the 'Spirit of Earth' and 'the original source ... "the I AM THAT I AM" ' that spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Watson believed that in these landscapes he experienced a divine revelation forming a psychic bridge and seeming to solve 'the problems of the opposites'—a concern common to several schools of Eastern and Western thought, such as Taoism and Hinduism in the East and the Christian and Stoic traditions of the West. Not surprisingly, these traditions were to play an increasingly important role in his

attempts to explore the relationship between humankind and nature, between man and woman, and between female and 'feminine'. As the Vedic tradition puts it:

> Man is of the earth and earthly, but the earth is not simply nature, is not merely geographical or material; it is part of Man himself, so that [he] can no more live without the earth than he can live without a body. At the same time ... Man is more than earth. The earth is the mother of Man, but Man is also lord over the earth (Panikkar 120)

For Watson land or 'earth' often becomes a catalyst of psychic development. But for this relationship between humankind ('of the earth and earthly') and our 'earth-mother', it is necessary, his writing suggests, to escape from the restraints of civilisation. Clearly influenced by the Boys' Own Annual tradition of adventure, in Watson's writing men are much more likely to effect this escape than women.

The landscape reminds its inhabitants—in particular, its female inhabitants—of their own transience. Watson's emphasis on what he sees as a gender based weakness lies at the heart of his concern with 'the problems of the opposites' (*This End* 184). For him, Woman, 'the feminine' as opposed to sexual woman, is 'the mother of Man and God ... the Goddess of Death, and ... strangely identified with ... Evil' (186). She represents 'the unconscious elements in Man which he fears and yet finds attractive' (186). As such, she is both the enigma with whom men have to come to terms and, in the long run, the means of this reconciliation.

A nebulous and undefined concept, 'the feminine' became central to Watson's thinking, linked as it was to the significance he came to find in primitive and Eastern spirituality and to an emerging fascination with the Shadow of Jungian psychology. A key to 'the ultimate meeting-place of the inner and outer life' (*This End* 186) and thus integral to the transformation of land into landscape in his work, this concept played an increasingly important role in his exploration of the self and its possibilities. So, for example, in both *The Desert Horizon* (1923) and its sequel, *Daimon* (1925) it is the protagonist Martin O'Brian, not his wife Maggie, who possesses and understands 'the feminine'. Similarly, in *The Partners* it is Tim Kennedy not his erstwhile mistress, Vera Chance, who possesses and understands it. This paradox is characteristic of Grant Watson's writing. Indeed, most of the women in his novels have a limited self-awareness, invariably remaining blind to the possibility of the unseen dimension which so many of his male characters explore in the desert. Those women who do leave civilisation usually do so under duress and do not survive long. They are plagued by despair and desperation. (The exception to this, as we shall see, is Lucy Sheldon in Watson's later novel, *The Nun and the Bandit*.)

Most of Watson's male protagonists seem to derive more satisfaction from the desert than from real women, whose primary function in life is to serve as 'an imaginative aspiration towards the completion of [a male partner]' (*Daimon* 51). In *Daimon*, for example, Martin O'Brian finds wholeness within himself in the arid landscape, confronting and being reconciled with his unconscious elements in the desert, that 'ultimate meeting place'. What this wholeness represents, however, is never really clear, and the typical obscurity of Watson's expression here may reflect his own confusion and uncertainties. Perhaps his position is best understood in terms of Eastern philosophy's dialectic between the yin and the yang and later the anima and animus in Jungian psychology. Whatever the source, it has great potency. Drawing on 'the feminine' within him, Martin finally becomes a kind of demi-god. Maggie, however, like most of Watson's women is left behind, bound by her sex and by her unques-

tioning acceptance of the rules of civilisation.

The quest for psychological wholeness became even more significant during the middle years of Watson's career, and his final Western Australian novels represent a more detailed attempt to reconcile 'the opposites'. These novels range widely through the unconscious as well as the conscious. In *The Partners*, for example, Tim's perception of his place in the desert is challenged, changed by the recent memory of a woman, Vera, who seems to '[fill] the sky and [cover] the earth' (167). She has awoken in him a sense of an overwhelming power in himself. Even as he later lies dying, racked with the pain of a snake bite, he is aware of her 'in some vague way present in the darkness', and as 'the soft aura of womanhood gently [enfolding] all his senses', his pain becomes a final orgasmic pleasure (224). In this way, as his protagonist finds in death the satisfaction of what Freud describes as humankind's blind desire for pleasure, whether in the form of love or death, Eros or Thanatos, we are once again reminded of the strange complex of sado-masochistic emotions women conjured up for Watson. Unlike Freud, however, he focuses on the way his protagonist's inner and outer selves are merged here. This leads to the discovery of what we are told is the 'greater, deeper significance' of woman (224-5), as that part of himself with which he must be reconciled. Woman here has lost her right to exist as an individual, becoming her partner's 'soul-image' and a means to his psychic fulfilment. She precipitates a sort of communion with the desert, investing it with meaning in her absence, but taking no real physical part in it.

Landscape for Watson, then, was not an indivisible whole. Rather it suggested what Raimundo Panikkar calls an inevitable polarity between 'the advaitic experience of Space' ('There is No' 80) and its expression in words. In turn this notion gives rise to dualistic language, as the two poles cannot be grasped at the same time: as Panikkar remarks, 'reality is not reducible to intelligibility' ('There is no' 80). This problem remained throughout Watson's career, to the extent that his sense of landscape derived from an attempted synthesis of the materials of experience and the ideas of the mind. In its later shape, however, he was to attempt to close the gap by means of Jungian psychology and Judaeo-Christian Gnosticism.

The Nun and the Bandit is similar in many ways to *The Partners*. Once again, slightly inaccurately, he plays off the anima and the animus, to constitute a self fascinated with destruction and oriented to death rather than to life. The novel tells the story of Michael, a petty criminal who kidnaps a Roman Catholic novice, Lucy Sheldon, whose sense of self, of the world and her place within it begins to disintegrate as they journey together into the desert. As she begins to suspect the coexistence of good and evil, light and shadow, Lucy feels 'the dangerous weakness of her sex' (75). Her clear beliefs begin to give way and the presence of God is obscured by her own fear, as Watson yet again suggests the inherent psychological and physical inferiority of women. The novice and the criminal begin to lose their separate identities, reduced (or elevated) to the constituent parts of a whole self at the novel's centre, which is also figured in the landscape. Their difference, Lucy gradually realises, is also a kind of psychic bond.

As they are presented here, Lucy and Michael are Watson's puppets, representing 'the divided halves of human life' claimed by a spiritual reality. But there is also a new development. Lucy contrasts sharply with Watson's representation of women in general; from the Aboriginal women in 'Out There' to the young Maggie O'Brian in *Daimon*. Unlike Lucy these women are unselfconscious beings, lesser creatures, governed by 'the deeper understanding' of their bodies and 'the need to propitiate ...

the male thing that masters [them]' (*The Partner* 180).

In the final chapters of *The Nun and the Bandit* Michael takes Lucy alone to an oasis. Here her world suddenly dissolves in a flash of 'terrible all-pervading' light and stillness, shattering the barrier between the unseen and seen realms and as she watches the landscape becomes 'unreal, or else more real' (260). The oasis is transformed before her eyes, and as it breaks up the rhythms of the universe are revealed. 'Chaos', we are told, 'is in conception', and the meaning of Lucy's Christian faith is transformed by this fusion of terrible and strange powers, suggesting the ordered chaos of simultaneous creation and destruction. Her former notion of a self's place in time and space is thus dispelled by an involuntary reconsideration of God. At the point of transformation, enveloped by 'fear of man, of God, of the great nothingness and the dissolving world', she can no longer pray. In this state Lucy is brought psychically closer to Michael.

Watson, however, seems not to have been content with a mere psychic union between Lucy and Michael, wanting perhaps to press the point in a shocking way. He later wrote that 'against all prejudice and tradition' it is imperative to the novel that Lucy bears 'the new symbol, the child of Michael and herself ... demanding to be born' (Watson 17). So it is inevitable that shortly after her transformation Michael rapes her. While the rape scene also represents a merging of animus and anima, reinforcing the novel's central concern, it is nevertheless the rape of a nun by a violent criminal. In the tradition of Victorian melodrama, Michael appears satanic to Lucy, with the sun at his back and his face hidden in shadow, while she is seemingly helpless, described as 'an animal ... already under the spell of death'. Resistance is useless (and incompatible with Watson's purpose), so with a feeling of 'release' puzzling to the reader she embraces him at the last moment. In this way, the novelist tells us, they become 'equal in insignificance ... met at last in union, and ... delivered both from God and Satan'. They are, in his view, reconciled with each other and their primitive origins. In the final analysis, however, it should be noted that, in the process of achieving this sense of wholeness, Lucy, the predestined rape victim, is sacrificed to Watson's idea of female weakness and vulnerability.

In conclusion, E.L. Grant Watson's Western Australian writing may be seen as an expression of a state of dissonance engendered in him by his experiences in the north-west and south-west, suggesting the intense intellectual, spiritual and socio-cultural challenges he perceived in 'that virgin territory'. The Western Australian wilderness became for him a sort of no-man's-land, or borderland, a symbol of the unconscious. It was here that he began to wrestle with 'the problem of the opposites', becoming increasingly fascinated by primitive culture and spirituality, Eastern mysticism and Christian gnosticism, as well as the writing of Freud and Jung. In a time of chaos and destruction—prior to, during and after the First World War—Watson sought the wholeness of the Western self, believing that an understanding of it could be achieved by focusing on the process by which land was transformed into landscape in the presence of this self. Importantly, despite his apparent attempts to banish his women characters, to confine them to the margins and focus on the physical and psychical place of the male self, the female figure consistently reappears at the centre of his Western Australian novels. Figured in the desert and bush landscapes, she plays a central role in this quest for wholeness, becoming as she does so 'a kind of Aladdin cave within which light and darkness, good and evil, grace and wilfulness, spirit and soul, interplay' (Campbell 397).

Works cited

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God (Vol. III): Occidental Mythology.* Ringwood: Penguin, 1976.
Grant Watson, E.L. *Daimon.* London: Jonathan Cape, 1925.
____ 'Out There' in *Descent of Spirit.* Ed. Dorothy Green. Sydney: Primavera Press.
____. *The Partners.* London: Victor Gollancz, 1933. (Also published as *Lost Man.* New York: Harper, 1934).
____. *The Nun and the Bandit.* London: Cresset Press, 1935.
____. 'The Renegade Hero and the Anima'. National Library of Australia, MS. 4950, Box 3.
____. *To This End.* (Unpublished MS.)
JanMohamed, Abdul. 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature.' Henry Louis Gates Jr. Ed. *'Race', Writing and Difference.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994, 75-86.
Panikkar, Raimundo. *The Vedic Experience.* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977.
____. 'There is No Outer Without Inner Space.' *Cross Currents,* 43, 1 (Spring 1993): 60-81.