

## PATRICIA WRIGHTSON'S BOOK OF WIRRUN: RELIGION, FOLKLORE, HERO-TALE?

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Some time ago I received a letter from Gillian Adams of the University of Austin, Texas, listing what she believed were some essentials for an article on Patricia Wrightson's novel *The Nargun and the Stars*. High on the list was the need for discussion of the religious aspects of the spirit creatures that Wrightson brought to their first successful expression in that novel. Professor Adams was showing an interest that I have found common among North American academics, an interest in the religious beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples implicit or explicit in works written for children and adolescents. Perhaps that interest reflects the decline of the explicitly Christian didacticism strongly present in such literature in the past and the desire to replace it with a non-Christian or post-Christian alternative such as that found in Wrightson's work. This paper is by way of being a response to the religious part of Professor Adams's list, though I am here discussing Wrightson's trilogy collectively known as *The Book of Wirrun* rather than *The Nargun and the Stars* because the trilogy deals with such issues as love, death, loss, and identity — issues that raise what might be called religious questions — more explicitly than the earlier novel does. There are religious aspects to Wrightson's spirit creatures, but they are probably not what Gillian Adams was expecting. I believe that the spirit creatures of the trilogy are not expressions of Aboriginal religion, but are actors in a conventional hero-tale, expressions of a Romantic view of landscape as a source of insight into the human mind and psyche, and assistants in the expression of Wrightson's own beliefs about the source and purpose of human existence — of her own religion, if you like.

To clear the ground, it is worthwhile to distinguish between the religious and the supernatural. There are supernatural figures in what we would unhesitatingly call folklore rather than

religion: they might best be lumped together under the heading of "fairies," though by that term I mean the kinds of figures the Irish call the *Sidhe* — figures that are not necessarily diminutive, pretty, or harmless, but are rather to be honoured, feared, placated, or at least accounted for in a culture in which souring of milk or skittishness of animals or sustained good harvests or obedience to local mores were important matters. Yet these fairies are not objects of worship either, and in that respect, I contend, are not religious. Among such figures in Wrightson's work are the Bunyip, known to early settlers in many parts of eastern Australia from contact with Aboriginal people, and the more local figures such as the Narguns, Nyols, and Potkooorks noted by Aldo Massola in his book *Bunjil's Cave*. There are also figures derived from Aboriginal cautionary tales, such as the Bagini, the Mungga-Mungga, and the Abuba, which were designed to curb the sexual adventurousness of young men. These figures are associated with the well established fairy tale feature of transformation, both their own, and that of their victims. There is Balyet, whose story is both a cautionary tale about good faith in social and sexual relationships and a *pourquoi* tale about the origin of the echo. Finally, there are figures derived from those freely painted and discussed by Aboriginal people, such as the Mimi spirits painted by artists like Yirawala. On this count, most of Wrightson's spirits are not figures of religion, but of folklore.

Next, it helps to examine Wrightson's own comments about her use of Aboriginal figures. In author's notes to her novels and in articles about them Wrightson sets out her self-imposed limitations in using Aboriginal material. In every case, she uses resources freely published and readily available:

Every spirit I have used in a story or recorded on my cards has already been put on record by people better equipped. I have done some combing and collecting, that is all. It can be slow and laborious, and I suppose it might count as a sort of secondary research, but anyone can do it with the help of almost any library ("The Square Professionalist" 7).

In matters relating to creation, something that might justifiably be called a religious issue, Wrightson does not present Aboriginal material at all. As she explains in the "Author's Note" to *The Dark Bright Water*, she postulates her own "first things" in the

world of the trilogy, avoiding the use of Aboriginal creation stories by inventing material that she specifically dissociates from traditional Aboriginal beliefs. It is possible that some of her characters, such as that of Ko-in, may have been religious rather than folkloric, but the nineteenth-century writers who collected their names and briefly described them may not have known of any religious significance they might have had, and there is no likelihood now that we shall ever find it out. Wrightson's sources are very sketchy — writers such as L.E. Threlkeld, whose book *An Australian Language, As Spoken by the Awabakal, The People of Awaba or Lake Macquarie (Near Newcastle, New South Wales) Being an Account of Their Language, Traditions, and Customs* has a title almost as long as some of the notes from which Wrightson derived Ko-in, Puttikan, Yahoo, and Bimpo-in for the trilogy. When Aboriginal people do know the significance of the stories that non-Aborigines have collected, they are increasingly prepared to assert their rights to those stories legally, as in the case reported on ABC Radio on December 19, 1994, relating to the stories of some of the people of the Flinders Ranges. It seems safe to say that since there have been no complaints from Aboriginal people about the way in which Wrightson has used Aboriginal spirits as characters she is on pretty safe ground — and that it is not a sacred site.

A further consideration in discussing Aboriginal religion is how little European Australians know and understand of it. Much of it is lost beyond recovery, and since much Aboriginal religion is secret, we cannot know what is and is not significant, or whether a story recorded from the past is the "inside" story or a cover story for the uninitiated. Nor can we fully understand the world view that underlies a story. So closely associated are Aboriginal stories and particular areas of land that in a living Aboriginal language such as Yura Ngawarla, spoken in the Flinders Ranges, "'telling (someone) a story', *yarta wandatha*, means simply 'telling (someone) the land (*yarta*)', or 'linking that (someone) to the land'" (Tunbridge xxxv). The traditional stories of each Aboriginal group in its particular part of the country serve many functions, often simultaneously. Such stories may give the history of a location, account for the origins of natural phenomena, map the landscape, categorize geographical knowledge, record boundaries, collect environmental knowledge, explain the origins of social institutions and customs, provide a rubric for rituals, offer

guidelines to social and moral values, embody warnings to transgressors of rules, offer encouragement in the face of difficulties, entertain listeners, and act as a focus of community identity (Tunbridge xxxvii-xxxix), and it is most unlikely that a European Australian would understand many of those nuances. The situation is parallel to that noted by Robin McGrath in relation to Inuit writing: "If, as an English reader, you understand everything in the work, then it is probably not the product of an Inuk writer" (4).

Finally, it does not seem true that there is or was any single set of beliefs and practices that one can call "Aboriginal religion", and so it would not be possible to assign the spirits Wrightson has collected from all over the country to any overarching religion, even if such spirits had religious rather than folkloric significance. It is unlikely that over 40,000 years a wide variety of belief and practice did not develop among Aboriginal Australians through links to specific areas, borrowing, syncretism, and innovation. The plural title of Mircea Eliade's *Australian Religions: An Introduction* acknowledges that variety. For all these reasons, then, I would argue that the spirits of *The Book of Wirrun* and some of Wrightson's other fantasy novels are not expressions of the religion of Aboriginal people. Nevertheless, I should like to argue that, along with the character of Wirrun himself, they developed during the composition of the trilogy as expressions of Wrightson's own attitudes to the place and purpose of humankind in the universe — attitudes that involve what are usually called religious issues — and that those attitudes clearly stem from European Romanticism.

The hero-journey of Wirrun began simply enough in *The Ice is Coming* as an adventure tale, in which a young urbanized Aborigine fights against the Ninya, a group of spirits who break out of their traditional underground territory in central Australia and move south-east in order to overcome the Eldest Nargun, a creature of stone whose power over the primordial fires of creation had once confined the Ninya to one place — a memory of the end of the Ice Age, perhaps. What was intended to be a single novel rapidly grew, however; Wrightson realized that she "had told only a beginning and not a story", and that she could not "turn a person into a hero ... without tracing what herohood really involves" ("Voyage in a Dinghy" 12). For Wrightson, as for other writers of high fantasy for adolescents such as Ursula Le Guin, attaining

heroism involves the process of individuation, and Wurrin's heroic journey is one of self-discovery, in which he comes of age, and then faces two of the major elements of human life: first sexuality and love, then death. As Wrightson's trilogy developed the functions of its Aboriginal spirit characters altered, but did not include the expression of Aboriginal religious beliefs. Rather, some of the spirit figures are examples of characters often seen in hero tales; some are outgrowths of Wrightson's essentially Romantic view of the landscape as a source of knowledge and understanding; some are expressions of Wrightson's own view of the end of human existence and of doctrines of reward and punishment in an afterlife — a view that also has Romantic antecedents.

The trilogy follows the pattern of the hero tale most clearly outlined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Wurrin becomes a "man of self-achieved submission" (Campbell 16) to the tasks that result in his rebirth as a hero, and he is able "to battle past his personal and local limitations" (Campbell 19) as an uninitiated youth and a member of a marginalized group to become a Clever Man whose power is not limited to a particular part of the country. Wurrin is called to adventure but at first refuses the call (Campbell 36); he moves into a mysterious liminal zone inhabited by strange beings (58) such as the Puttikan, Yaho, and Bimpo-in; he accepts the call to adventure and is helped by fatherly and motherly figures in the form of Ko-in and the Mimi (Campbell 73); and he receives an amulet (the "power") from Ko-in (Campbell 69). Wurrin then undergoes a series of trials including a night sea-journey with the bunyip (Campbell 245) (which in true folkloric fashion he has saved from being trapped in the ice of a freezing creek) and a decisive battle with the Ninya, in which he is aided by the shape-shifting Yabon and every spirit creature that he has met on his journey to the south coast of New South Wales. The final battle of *The Ice is Coming* is like similar final battles in the work of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, and Wrightson closes the story of the first book of the trilogy with the rewards of virtue and courage that usually follow such battles. She closes that story, however, at the beginning of the second book rather than at the end of the first, because she had already begun to develop her hero's story further, and at this point her own views of the ends of human life begin to come to the fore.

Wrightson presents Wurrin's trials in *The Ice is Coming* as equivalent to initiation, and in the following two novels Wurrin

resumes the journey of the conventional hero in overcoming suffering, such as the death of his closest friend, and meeting the goddess (Campbell 36), a woman who is both temptress and wife. He learns to comprehend and to serve her, in Campbell's words, [not] "by the animal desire of an Actaeon, not by the fastidious revulsion of such as Fergus ... but only by gentleness" (118). The *hieros gamos* of Wirrun and Murra is blissful and playful, but is painfully cut short by her abduction by her sisters. With the help of Murra, however, Wirrun faces Wulgaru (Campbell 131), in the process denying the existence of a punitive god and of sin (Campbell 130), and as a result achieves apotheosis, having "gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance" (Campbell 151) to the understanding that suffering is "completely validated in the majesty of Being" (Campbell 147). Wirrun and Murra then live forever in a blessed state (Campbell 193) — male and female, human and spirit, self and other joined for ever.

For Wrightson that blessed state is one that she had first described in 1960 in *The Rocks of Honey*. It involves a return to what M.H. Abrams calls "a lost condition of wholeness and community" (313) through a return to the traditional Aboriginal life that Wrightson, like her predecessors the Jindyworobaks, depicts as having retained that sense of wholeness through attachment to the land. That traditional Aboriginal life, or rather Wrightson's Romantically idealized version of it, and the land from which it grows, are also bases of authority in Wrightson's view of human life. The natural world is the source and end of human existence for Wrightson in *The Book of Wirrun*, and she expresses that belief in terms that echo Exodus 20: 2-3: *I am Land, the First Thing. Serve me* (Ice 47). "Natural" human beings, represented by the Aboriginal people, know they are outgrowths of the land; Wirrun "hears" it give its commandment because as an Aborigine he is mystically attuned to it. But he is also on a mountain — a place that throughout Wrightson's work is associated with the romantic moment of unity with nature during which, as Wordsworth says in "Tintern Abbey,"

with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (47-49)

The natural world also speaks directly to Wrightson's Aboriginal characters through some of its ancient spirits. The small, grey Nyols, with their voices that rumble like stones (*Ice* 117), or the Narguns, creatures of rock and fire, are the land personified. Wrightson expresses the care Wirrun has for the natural world in terms that could more readily be ascribed to Wordsworth than to the complex interrelationship of traditional Aboriginal people with the land (Eliade 60-83); Wirrun's attachment to the tiny lives of dung-beetle, toadstool, and worm (*Ice* 57) follows Wordsworth's injunction:

To look with feelings of fraternal love  
 Upon those unassuming things that hold  
 A silent station in this beauteous world.  
 (1805 *Prelude* 13. 51-53)

Further, what M.H. Abrams calls "the *verba visibilia*, the symbolic language of the landscape" (104) is a source of authority in expressing Wrightson's view of human response to inevitable pain and loss in life. In the trilogy Wrightson depicts human beings not as creations of a beneficent God but as outgrowths of the natural world, and Murra, Wirrun's spirit wife, asserts by reference to the landscape humankind's origin and the supreme value of unselfish, individual human endurance that is Wrightson's only answer to the problem of human suffering:

There is the land from which we both are made, you and I,  
 and does it not keep its own laws? Once it raised itself up, and  
 swallowed seas; they lie under it still .... It had proud rivers  
 and tall forests then. See it now, this land, tired and old, worn  
 down with sun and wind; for that is the law of lands. Am I  
 more than the land? Must I not keep its old laws? (*Wind* 22)

Wirrun's assertion of endurance is also expressed in a view of the landscape:

The tired heights circled their secret valleys; stranded rivers  
 vanished into guarded, hidden waters. The rough old rock  
 was wearing into soil, the trees turned their grey leaves edge-  
 on to the sun. He said soberly, "She don't give in, any rate; she  
 creeps back another way." (*Wind* 22)

Thus Wrightson's answer to:

the fear that kills,  
 And hope that is unwilling to be fed;  
 Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills  
 (Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence" 113-115)

is much the same as Wordsworth's, and is derived from a similar Romantic mingling of explanatory voice and exemplary landscape.

In the final book of the trilogy, *Behind the Wind*, Wrightson makes her own religious position even more explicit. Wirrun achieves salvation through suffering and through the assertion of naked selfhood (*Wind* 121, 148). Wirrun's spirit wife, having also achieved similar identity, having undergone separation from the unthinking and unselfconscious life of a spirit creature, separation from Wirrun, and the suffering associated with those separations, "has broken free" (*Wind* 156) after helping him in his defiance of the strange figure of Wulgaru. Through this defiance, Wrightson explicitly rejects the doctrine of reward and punishment after death and perhaps comments on religions that teach it; Wulgaru is terrifying, but is man-made — a matter that Wrightson adverts to on several occasions in *Behind the Wind*. She depicts Wulgaru as being different from other spirits that deal with the dead in that it cannot be overcome by ritual, and that all the dead go to it for judgment and, if necessary, purgation of sin: Wulgaru "[gets] the lot and says which ones can go home. There's some gotta be cleaned up first with fire". But not only is this spirit rejected as being something that "[fits] no lore of the People", it is also "[worse] because they made it theirselves", in the words of an Aboriginal elder (*Wind* 56). Wrightson depicts the world-view of those who submit to Wulgaru's judgment as being despairing and fearful. As he looks through the eyes of a mask sent by Wulgaru, Wirrun sees a fallen universe:

the spirits of dead men drifting and wailing below, and the land's dark mass spread out in rain-carved heights and valleys and swamps, and star-flecked rivers snake-gliding to the sea; but the dead were cowed weak things that had failed in life, and the land was wearing into nothing, and the rivers hid old and fearful things (*Wind* 77).



Thus the doctrine of the Fall is, for Wrightson, both despairing and out of kilter with what she presents as the beliefs of those who have retained their natural connexion with the land — the Aboriginal people who do not accept Wulgaru — and out of kilter with what for her are the supreme virtues of courage and endurance in inevitable suffering, virtues that she expresses through the spirits of the land and the land itself.

Wirrun's story is, therefore, to use M.H. Abrams's terms in *Natural Supernaturalism*, not a *Heilsgeschichte* but a Romantic *Bildungsgeschichte* in which

the redemptive goal of the history of mankind [is] shifted from the reconciliation and reunion of man with a transcendent God to ... a reunion of the spirit with its own other ... [The] history of mankind, as well as the history of the reflective individual, [is] conceived not as probation for an other-worldly heaven but as a process of the self-formation, or the self-education, of the mind and moral being of man from the dawn of consciousness to the stage of full maturity (187-88).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Wordsworth's description of the growth of self in *The Prelude* offered an alternative to "the painful process of Christian conversion and redemption", replacing it with "a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward" (Abrams 96). At the end of the twentieth century Patricia Wrightson has used a Romantic view of the Australian landscape, its indigenous people, and their folklore, to present to adolescent readers an heroic alternative to Christian conversion or the *peregrinatio vitae* — to depict a process of self-formation that occupies a whole lifetime.

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