

**"ONE GREAT WORD OF FIRE": JUDITH WRIGHT'S
AUSTRALIA, THE LAND OF FIRE**

Veronica Brady

Judith Wright stands within a tradition, a tradition of hope but also of anxiety. Colonising is not an easy business, nor is it merely material. "Settlement in a new, unknown, uncultivated country", according to Mircea Eliade, "is equivalent to an act of creation...[It involves] the transformation of chaos into cosmos".¹ Put another way, the settler becomes Christopher Brennan's "Wanderer on the way to the self", attempting to fuse new physical realities and the energies and hungers within the self. This is the task Wright has pursued through her long and significant career. In this task the land itself has been central. Like Joseph Furphy she believed, and still believes, that Australians achieve full consciousness of themselves in their contact with the land itself and that it is our task to draw out the "latent meaning" still to be discovered within it and "faithfully and lovingly" interpret it.²

Essentially this is a religious or, better, a spiritual task, so it is perhaps important that we are reflecting on this on the day of Pentecost, which is also the great harvest festival of Jewish tradition. It is true that Wright's work is not often seen in these terms, partly because there is a long suspicion of religion in Australian culture: in 1904 A. G. Stephens asserted that "the Australian environment is unfavourable to the growth of religion"³ and since then this has generally been seen as axiomatic. Wright herself is deeply suspicious of conventional religion and religious talk. But that is not the point. She is a poet, and a poet of a particular kind. Convinced that we live in a destitute time, destitute, as Heidegger put it

not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality... Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned,⁴

her poetry keeps to the trace of the holy, of "the unconcealedness of the nature of pain, death and love".⁵ Our culture may be concerned with material things, "distracted from distraction by distraction":

The hound sobs on the trail,
but the wolf's long dead – long dead
the unseen choice, the need
that led into this night.⁶

but Wright is determined to keep open a way to terror and splendour, the holy.

Love famously opened this way. Few have written so powerfully about it, particularly about pregnancy and birth, about "living in the realm of the absolute even".⁷ But it put her in touch also with the world's more lyrical energies, enabled her at times to "hear the world breathing", as in the poem which begins,

Our love is so natural,
the wild animals move
gentle and light on
the shores of our love.⁸

Before human relationships, however, the land spoke to her. Here as a "lonely" child exploring the family property she had her first intuitions of what Levinas calls "existence without existents", an "impersonal, anonymous, yet inciting unstable 'consummation' of being which murmurs in the depth of nothingness" which transcends inwardness and external reality, making it impossible to distinguish between them.⁹

As a child

to hide in a thrust of green leaves
with the blood's leap and retreat
warm in you,
burning, going and returning
out of your eyes, out of your hands and your feet—
like a noise of bees, growing, increasing¹⁰

was to find a maternal presence, life-growing, all-enveloping and, even more importantly, pulsing with energy (her own mother was an invalid

throughout her childhood). Fire has always been a central symbol for her – “The sum of it all is Energy”,¹¹ she wrote in one of her last poems – and she found it in the land. As a child, for instance, she used to marshall her two little brothers, march them down the hill and over the creek to a rocky outcrop which she would strike with a piece of iron, drawing sparks from the rock and declare herself mistress of its mysterious powers.¹²

But this was childhood bravado. These were powers which defy human mastery, as she understood especially as she grew older. As she put it much later:

Most children are brought up in the “I” tradition... the ego, it’s me and what I think. But when you live in very close contact with a large and splendid landscape as I did you feel yourself as a good deal smaller than just I.¹³

This is a feeling which is essentially theological. Existence is dialectical, not monological; self exists in relation to the other/Other. The confidence of the Cartesian *cogito* gives way to this deeper, more worshipful sense of reality. “The Nautilus”, a meditation on an empty shell, as metaphor for this narrow self, on the beach, puts it this way:

The thing it made was its own self, enclosed it,
and was the prison that prevented sight.¹⁴

To live truly is to move beyond possessing and being possessed. It involves being answerable to an authority, an energy manifest in the wind’s “beat and waves” but also in

...the invisible legion
of momentary crystals, less-than-a-second’s tick
lives, love’s first and everywhere creation,¹⁵

in “the angry granite,/the hungry range”¹⁶ of the interior and the rainforest dripping and glowing with its green fertility.

In passing it is worth noting that this is a mode of existence which H el ene Cixous calls “feminine”. In contrast with what she calls the “masculine”, which is preoccupied with property, propriety and

appropriation, it involves an interplay between word and flesh, eros and thanatos, joy and pain, abjection and celebration. One gives and receives from energies both within and outside the self, listening to "the resonance of [this] fore-language... which knows neither enclosure nor death"¹⁷ and lets it speak,

...the word that, when all words are said,
shall compass more than speech.¹⁸

"Rainforest", for instance, expresses this kind of listening:

The tree-frog croaks his far-off song.
His voice is stillness, moss and rain
drunk from the forest ages long.

We cannot understand that call
unless we move into his dream,
where all is one and one is all.¹⁹

This does not mean that the self dissolves into the whole, however. Rather it becomes aware of the claims of the energies which flow through the self of another root, as it were, growing up within the first one which we call the "self", some preoriginary reality to which it is somehow responsible and before which the only proper attitude is reverence.²⁰

When I look up at the stars I don't try counting,
but I know that the lights I see can pass right through me.

What mind could weave such a complicated web?²¹

Mastery gives way to humility, to knowing one's place in the scheme of things:

Whatever Being is, that formula,
it dies as we pursue it past the word.²²

Significantly, Wright here echoes contemporary theologians attempting to talk about God in terms of categories of Being. But she also points further, highlighting the question of language. This, too, is where the symbol of fire becomes significant. Levinas, to mention him again, insists on

the gap between existence and language, distinguishing between the text and what flows into it and goes beyond it, between what he calls the "said" and "the saying", the living activity of interpretive struggle to receive and respond to the energies flowing through the text. As one commentator explains it; "the saying resounds or echoes outside of place and outside of time, in a way that destabilises the secure position we take up in the said, in our conceptual knowledge and our truths".²³

For Wright this "saying" first came to her from the natural world, even from something as seemingly insignificant as a conch shell,

...half-guess, half-knowledge I contract
into a beast's blind orbit, stare deep down
the cliffs not I have climbed,

aware that beyond her,

...life, the force that leapt between your poles,
burns forward still in me against the night.

Fire, it seems, is the image that best expresses this sense of this "brilliant arch from darkness into darkness",²⁴ the saying which also unsays whatever we might know because the thought of fire involves both the need for and fear of exposure. Language, Levinas remarks, is born in responsibility: "one has to respond to one's right to be".²⁵

Even as a child, born into a pioneering land-owning family, Wright's sense of existence, however, had involved this sense of responsibility for the land, and as she grew older, for its history. She became aware of the ways in which white occupation had changed and sometimes damaged the land. The "grandeur" of the trees she saw, "their architecture, the hanging gardens of ferns and orchids", filled her with awe. But she was aware also of the fate of those chopped down in the interests of "progress", of the "red wounds in the soil - bleeding in every rainfall - [which took] their place".²⁶

But partly through her father who had had an Aboriginal nurse whom he dearly loved, and partly because the land seemed to speak of some deep absence, some sense of loss within herself, she also became aware of

the Aboriginal "other" to whom and for whose fate she was somehow responsible. This is the awareness expressed in early poems like "Bora Ring", "Half-Caste Girl" and "Nigger's Leap, New England" but also in late poems like "The Dark Ones". "Nigger's Leap", a response to a massacre which had occurred in the early days of settlement, expresses the realisation that Levinas sees as the point at which a sense of existence is transformed and becomes ethical, the realisation that "my being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun'" has been at the expense of the other to whom I am therefore responsible.²⁷ As "Nigger's Leap" expresses it:

...we should have known
that night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.
And there they lie that were ourselves with strange.²⁸

"The Dark Ones" extends this. The wounds we have inflicted on the land and on its first peoples have also wounded us.

Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound

when we look at them, dispossessed and humiliated,

the night ghosts of a land
only by day possessed

who remind us that

Day has another side.
Night has its time to live,
a depth that rhymes our pride
with its alternative.²⁹

That, I suggest, is why ultimately what she finds in the land and in relationships is ultimately fire. Even looking into a pool, in the "pure sleep" of contemplation which unbars "every depth and secret", there is fire, a "spear of light", the reflection of a rising star, a fire

my very truth must answer.
That shaft shall pierce me through
till I cool its white-hot metal.³⁰

Fire, of course, is a symbol of divinity, not only in the Judeo-Christian tradition but in other religious traditions. Wright has long been interested in Hindu thought, and this interest is very clear in many of the poems in *The Two Fires* (1955) in the contrast between the fires of destruction, evident in the fires of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "the man-created fire" and the holy fires of creation working still

to make a place for those who were born and died
to build a house that held the bridegroom and the bride.³¹

But for our purposes perhaps the key lies in the Jewish tradition, in the idea of the "breaking of the vessels", the idea that, having made the world, the Holy One withdrew from it, leaving behind seeds of his fire scattered through the universe, "the holy seed that knew no time".³² Our task is to enkindle them until creation runs up in the fires of love.

This is the vision implicit still in the last poem of the *Collected Poems*, "Patterns", though it is even more urgent in its contrast of the "blinding glare" of the nuclear explosions that "circled the world and settled in our bones" and the "ethical fire" from which we come and to which we return, "pure light, pure lightness". But our place within the whole is more explicit, "Born of fire", yet we have also "possessed by darkness", obsessed with violence, destruction rather than creation. This is the heart of her vision,

The play of opposites, their interpenetration -
there's the reality, the fission and the fusion,³³

and it is a heart which brings us back to the land, because it is in the land that we come face to face with this "play of opposites".

For her this encounter occurs when she contemplates the way we have ravaged the land;

opened by whips and greed
these plains lie torn and scarred,³⁴

the "living soil" ebbing "with the tree/to naked poverty".³⁵ But because self and land are so intimately related for her a deeper crisis is involved:

I am what the land has made
the land's myself, I said.

When the land is eroded

then I erode; my blood
reddens the stream in flood.³⁶

If the land is in a sense a mirror of the self then we look into the heart of darkness:

For we are conquerors and self-poisoners
and dying of the venom that we make
even while [you] die of us.³⁷

Nature no longer reflects our complacencies, it accuses us, and accuses us in the name of the Other.

"The Lake", written sometime earlier, makes this clear. Language,

the net where time is knotted by the word,
that flying needle,

trawls the world. But it can only point beyond itself to some final net-maker:

What lover's shuttle flew when all began?
Who chose the images this net can draw? –
sun, moon and cloud, the hanging leaves and trees,
and leaning through, the terrible face of man:
my face,

terrible because it can refuse the encounter which demands the obedience of love.

...I looked, and there my eyes met eyes,
lover to lover, Deep I looked and saw.³⁸

This is what another poem calls "the terrible centre",

whose periphery holds
the world we wander in,

the point at which the ultimate dancer, the lord of fire, dances. In this poem the sense of exile, of "the wanderer on the way to the self" is strong.

Caught between birth and death
we stand alone in the dark
to watch the blazing wheel
on which the earth is a spark.

But also points to a moment in which

[the] flower will open at last
to let the wanderer in.³⁹

The land continues to witness to this fire, in the deserts building

difficult flower, tree, bird,
lizard and sandstone ridge,⁴⁰

in the wild flowers of the coastal plains, the wattle, the "golden tree" "round as the sun"⁴¹ and the flame trees she wrote about on the ridge opposite their house at Mt Tambourine:

Out of the torn earth's mouth
Comes the old cry of praise...

...I drink you with my sight
and I am filled with fire.⁴²

This is to give new, more intense meaning to the idea of *Terra Australis del Sancto Spiritu*. Its difficulty and strangeness to us offers a glimpse of the living One, Hopkins' "past all grasp/God", terror yet joy, multiple yet one, generosity and energy beyond our comprehension, revealed in love but also in pain and sorrow. The fact that it is only a glimpse is also part of the gift. In the words of one theologian, it is "an act of

grace that God is revealed with such reserve and not in God's full and awesome holiness"⁴³ because no one can see God and live.⁴⁴ By definition, this grace demands obedience, a transvaluation of value,

The speech of fire is all an upward prayer,
evangel to convert
to primal purity
all pasts that die,
all time's long error and black history
to be a speck of carbon in the sky.⁴⁵

This may seem, and indeed is, ecstatic. But it has profoundly political consequences because the Other manifests itself also in and to the other, the first peoples whose life and history is so intimately bound up with that of the land. "Canefields", a poem about an Aboriginal girl leaning on a bridge looking down into the dark waters of a lagoon in the middle of the canefields, "folding her sorrow into her breast", links her with the journey to the centre because she is a figure of loss – that is, of our responsibility.

The old land is marshalled under
the heavy regiment of green cane,

our imposition. But the paperbarks by the lagoon

unroll their blank and tattered parchment,
waiting for some unknown inscription
which love might make in the dark water

In the water, a great lily which

sets her perfect dusk-blue petals
in their inherited order of prayer
around that blazing throne, her centre

offers its promise. "Her worship [will] find its answer."⁴⁶

She is still at home because she is still part of a culture of worship, as another poem, "At Cooloola", puts it,

...that no land is won or lost by wars,
for earth is spirit.

The task for us is to learn to live by the spirit, a task which demands that we surrender to the fire:

I know that we are justified only by love,
but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.⁴⁷

We must "reconcile opposing principles", understand that perhaps after all, as "Patterns" says, "the dark itself is the source of meaning".⁴⁸

What if the special grace of Australia were that it is the land of fire, of the transvaluation of the values by which Western culture has lived, the place in which the narrow boundaries of property, propriety and appropriation shatter under the impact of larger reality? What if we learned to pray:

O overcome me, Power and Truth;
transmute my ignorance, burn it bare;
so that against your flame, not I
but all that is not you, may die.⁴⁹

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