

John Hawke: The Moving Image: Judith Wright's Symbolist Language

Author: John Hawke

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IN A 1965 interview with John Thompson, Judith Wright was asked if she considered herself a 'nature poet'. She replied, 'No, I don't. My real interest, I think, is the question of man in nature—man as part of nature. The theory of correspondences that Baudelaire brought forward—the question of nature as a symbol for one's experience has always seemed to me to have a great deal in it.'¹ Thompson is reiterating a misconception common to readers of the poets of the 1940s—one which affects Douglas Stewart, for example, as much as Judith Wright—which reduces their poetry to its face-value, treating them as 'landscape' poets concerned primarily with the depiction of Australian fauna and flora. It is a view which might be seen to derive from the nationalist tradition of colonial art-criticism, in which painters are judged according to the accuracy of their figuration of local scenes. But the themes of Australian poetry, at least from the time of Harpur and Kendall, have followed a quite different trajectory from those of our artists. As Wright's reply clearly indicates, the central thematic concerns of our poets lie firmly within the metaphysical traditions of Romanticism and its adaptation in French Symbolism. In the words of Tom Inglis Moore, Wright belongs to 'a line of philosophical poets, and is continuing a well-established tradition of metaphysics in Australian poetry'²—and he cites Harpur, Kendall, O'Dowd and Brennan as precursors.

Wright has herself traced this lineage as clearly as any Australian critic, in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965) and in the essays 'Mainly About Poets' collected in *Because I Was Invited* (1975). In the first section of her important essay, 'Romanticism and the Last Frontier (1958, revised 1975), the poet attempts to define Romanticism—and its decline in the face of Victorian empiricism—in relation to leading poets of the nineteenth century. She affirms the importance of the Romantic movement in establishing an animistic relationship between poet and Nature: the theory, she writes, 'enhanced not only the idea of Nature, but the idea of Man as her interpreter and as a creator in his own right, not of natural forms but of forms of art'.³ Wright contrasts this with the mechanistic world-view which came to prominence in the post-Romantic era, but she affirms the shift in attitude which was continued through the Baudelairean, Symbolist aesthetic cited in the Thompson interview:

*Nature can no longer be viewed as a machine. It has a living aspect, with which we find ourselves identifying... We can perceive, in the change from day to night, from winter to spring, an inescapable correspondence with the processes of our own bodies, and we can see those same changes going on in creatures other than ourselves... So it was this revived sense of a correspondence between man and his world that revitalised poetry in the early nineteenth century.*⁴

She sees this influence at work in the poetry of Harpur (which is indebted to Wordsworth), for whom 'mind was mind in God and Man equally, the one a manifestation of the other and both expressed in nature, or Nature'.⁵ But with the fracturing of the Romantic world-view, and the ascendancy of a Coleridgean theory of Imagination—of which Wright is highly critical—a pure interconnection of this kind is no longer possible. With Kendall, she writes, natural images are already devalued, employed only for decorative purposes or as pathetic fallacy. They become 'ghosts of a forgotten unity, in a fractured context';⁶ the lost Eden of Brennan and the Symbolists is already implicit here.

It is in section three of this essay, 'From Romanticism to Symbolism', that Wright presents her most detailed description of the Symbolist aesthetic. The subject of this passage is Christopher Brennan, but in many respects Wright here provides the clearest explication of the philosophical themes underlying her own

work. In analysing Brennan—and Inglis Moore notes that ‘she is closer to him in her metaphysics than she is to any other Australian poet’—Wright comes nearer to self-analysis than in perhaps any of her other critical writings.⁷ In ‘Romanticism and the Last Frontier’ Wright attempts a definition of Symbolism as detailed as any provided by an Australian poet since Brennan's own lectures. She begins with Baudelaire who, she says, ‘like Blake...took a Swedenborgian attitude’,⁸ offering the Theory of Correspondences as a way around the impasse of Coleridgean subjectivism. Nature gives poetry ‘a point of reference beyond the human, a set of symbols which could free the poet from the need to confine himself wholly to the human’.⁹ There is an implicit mysticism in this theory, and Wright says in her interview with Thompson, ‘I think that anyone who does any deep thinking about the place of man in nature does, at any rate, have his feet on the same path as the mystics have’.

Wright emphasises the crucial importance of language in Symbolist theory, as ‘the human contribution to the natural world, the great generalisation under which the individual and temporal flower in the individual, and temporal perception becomes eternal idea’.¹⁰ Wright's own inquiries into language and the evolution of the symbol—influenced by Susan Langer, Ernest Cassirer, and Jack McKinney's work in this field—are central to her poetry, and not incompatible with the Symbolist ethos as she defines it here. Indeed, up to this point Wright is in full agreement with the theory she describes. What she cannot accept is the Schopenhauerian aestheticism which underlies the later Symbolists’ rejection of the World for the Word: ‘the poet's vision became a private one, and the final effect of Symbolism was not a regaining or a strengthening of the poet's position as an interpreter of man and nature, but a further step away from it’.¹¹ Interestingly, she argues that Brennan himself took his influence from an earlier stage of Symbolism, prior to its decline into ‘relativism’ and ‘aestheticism’; perhaps Wright's own work could also be seen as belonging to this stage.

In Wright's characterisation of Brennan she finds a figure capable of synthesising mythological, philosophical and poetic sources: the cyclic ‘eternal images’ are now internalised symbols, becoming ‘part of man's inner world, symbolic of his experience...they become bearers of a universal, not an individual, meaning; but the aspect of it is linguistic, and as such internal’.¹² Wright sees a complex interrelationship between the poet and a vital Nature in Brennan's work—one which correlates with a similar impulse in her own: ‘Nature,’ she writes, ‘is not by any means to be thought of as wholly passive, as mere “material” to be acted upon’.¹³ In Brennan's poetry this is figured in the myth of Lilith, the cosmic bride whom the poet as ‘bridegroom’ seeks. It is an archetypal and masculinist myth which Wright herself does not directly imitate, but one which she employs knowingly in subverted form.¹⁴ Wright is well-aware of the traditional sources of Brennan's archetypes, and notes the connection between Lilith and the ‘ancient mother-goddess of the Mediterranean religions’,¹⁵ figured in patriarchal myth as Sphinx, Echidna, Chimera and Lamia. In Wright's own poetry, the rituals of Ishtar and Tammuz, Osiris and Isis, and the mysteries of Persephone, are explored in a manner comparable to that of Brennan. What emerges most clearly from her explication of Brennan's work is her innate familiarity with its sources; in Brennan she finds a powerful precursor for her own employment of the Symbolist method.

It is particularly interesting to see Wright's statement here of the post-Romantic problem. ‘Modern man,’ she writes,

*was no longer a king, a directly created Adam with God-given power over the natural world; he had a prehistory of conjunction with that world, and no clear distinction from it except in the powers of language—the Word, the Logos—and of consciousness...The task of throwing light into the outer world, of increasing consciousness through increasing knowledge, had not only to be directed to the external darkness, but to the internal darkness as well.*¹⁶

Wright here gives a strong clue to the meaning of the recurring symbols of light and darkness in her own work. Shirley Walker comments on this: ‘darkness and light provide the symbolic pattern for eternal recurrence, for rebirth and regeneration followed by regression, at death, to the dark womb of mother earth’.¹⁷ As Wright herself puts it: ‘the task of man is to increase the areas of light and bring into knowledge as much as is possible, both of ourselves and of the universe, and the tool is the word’.¹⁸ This suggests a hoped-for

teleology beyond the cycles of eternal recurrence, the recovered Eden which eluded Brennan, and which is to be attained through the dialectic of male and female principles of light and darkness. Wright's own poetry reveals an increasing pessimism about the possibilities of fulfilling this idealist quest.

Wright continues her discussion of the Symbolist influence in the essay 'Australian Poetry After Pearl Harbour', where she deals directly with the poetry of the 1940s. 'Nearly all the poetry written during those years retained the Romantic-Symbolist approach,' she writes, 'but instead of taking the path of the European "inner exploration", it was turned outward to explore the possibilities of the country itself and Australian history and character'.¹⁹ Wright and her contemporaries were indeed dealing with problems surrounding the depiction of Australian 'Nature', but from a new perspective; in essence, they were attempting to find Symbolist correlatives in their own Australian experience. They were not simply trying to write descriptively, but to initiate a philosophical inquiry into 'the question of man in nature' by adapting local landscape and history to symbol. In Wright's words, the attempt was 'to transfer a queer end-of-the-earth landscape into something symbolically functional'.²⁰ This was a necessary step beyond Brennan, who never seriously attempted to utilise the Australian landscape in his poetry.

Wright's own concept of the symbol is influenced as much by contemporary linguistic philosophy, and the researches of her husband J.P. McKinney, as by poetic theory; it is also informed by the primordialism of Mircea Eliade's writings on cosmogony and the birth of language. The debt to McKinney is particularly evident in Wright's most complete statement of the problem of language, the essay 'The Writer and the Crisis'. McKinney's early writings, which appeared as a series of articles in *Meanjin* in the 1940s, and in *The Challenge of Reason* (1950), are attempts to re-evaluate the place of philosophy in the modern world. Indeed, these writings—and Wright's own essay—might be seen as early contributions to contemporary discourse on the 'postmodern condition'. They describe a world in crisis following the loss of faith in a 'Universal Condition', in the face of quantum physics, atomistic and relativistic epistemologies, artistic subjectivism, and increasing specialisation across the disciplines. As McKinney puts it in 'Approach to the Universal Mystery': 'we are living in the final phase of a cultural cycle, in which the view we have held as to the Universe at large, and man's place and purpose in it, has been worked out to its logical limits'.²¹ But for McKinney this is also a moment of opportunity for a 'new vision':

*the tide of man's spiritual evolution is on the turn. The old ideas and old values are being reabsorbed into that primal state when experience was a unity and knowing and being were one.*²²

The reference here to a recourse to primordial knowledge, a central theme in his work, is of particular importance to Wright's poetry. Indeed, for McKinney the poet has a crucial role to play in the new world he envisions: 'the poetic gift becomes, not a mere personal possession, but a profound moral responsibility: on him who possesses it falls the ancient mantle of poet and prophet'.²³ It is not difficult to see why the young Judith Wright was drawn to the writer of these articles; the vatic role of the 'Maker' is clearly defined here.

The Challenge of Reason, with which Wright assisted McKinney, expands the rhetorical suggestions of the *Meanjin* articles into a systematic philosophical examination of the 'crisis' as he then saw it. Again, he is addressing a post-Newtonian world of relativity and Modernist experiment in art; once again he calls for a new intellectual compact, a Nietzschean 'transvaluation of all our values'.²⁴ But here McKinney attempts a complete historical overview of the philosophical sources of modern thought, beginning with the Socratic enquiry into the foundations of knowledge—which led to the science of Galileo, Hume, and the Encyclopaedists—and contrasting the 'other-worldly mysticism'²⁵ of Platonism with an empiricist philosophy of direct experience. 'The mystic,' McKinney writes, 'sees truth as an eternal *form*, lying behind and above the world of appearance and experience; his vision tends backward toward some hypothetical past of ultimate perfection, from which the present is a degradation'.²⁶ This is the Platonic theory of reminiscences, so influential on poetry of the Symbolist tradition.

McKinney then turns to primordial consciousness, which he describes as 'a stage at which experience was a unity and (to use the language of neoplatonism) "knowing and being were one"'.²⁷ It is a world of Bergsonian 'events', in which the outer world and 'the inner flux of human consciousness...are merged

into a sort of continuum'.²⁸ It is also 'a world governed by chance'.²⁹ McKinney describes the evolution of consciousness through three stages, emotional, sensory, and mental; Thales' question, 'How is the world constituted?' signals the final expression of the synthesis of experience. He is noticeably critical of the 'unworldly abstractions' of neoplatonism which succeed the Socratic era; this is significant, given the neoplatonic subtext often evident in Wright's poetry. McKinney's description of the replacement of reason by 'personal insight, arrived at through stern subduing of the senses and an arduous cultivation of the power of the spirit... a personal and elemental intuition in which the subject and object of thought, the knower and the known, were merged, and "knowing and being were one" '³⁰ might be read as characteristic of Wright's poetic project.

After an account of the scientific empiricism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, exemplified by Bacon, McKinney arrives at the modern world of quantum physics, the subject of his *Meanjin* essays. He now sees in the quantum era a return to 'abstract and primitive elements', in which the subject-object distinction is once again radicalised and indeterminate: quantum mechanics appears as 'the conscious and deliberate formulation of that which was primarily unconscious and intuitive; what was originally an unconscious reaction now becomes a conscious mental process'.³¹ The progress of human evolution has thus followed a circle, 'reaching back to the primordial source of our common experience',³² and he cites Jung's exploration of the sources of unconscious meaning as an example of this primordialist tendency: 'we are today engaged in the task of *consciously* formulating the primitive individual's *unconscious* and elemental reactions to the world around him'.³³ McKinney sees the postwar world as 'the climacteric of western culture',³⁴ and anticipates the dualistic theme of Wright's *The Two Fires* in his description of the atomic age, divided between

*the conception, on the one hand, of Nature as a self-sufficient physical system which is essentially the counterpart of a sensory experience, and on the other of man, the triumphant investigator of the ultimate secrets of this external physical system, as the master of his own intellectual and material destiny. It is this dual idea that has constituted the inspiration of our whole modern way of life, and the significant fact is that, at the point where the latter conception—that of man as the master of his own destiny—has come to dominate our minds, the former conception, on which it rested—that of the Word as an expression of pure sensory experience—has already broken down under methodological analysis.*³⁵

The relevance of this argument to Judith Wright's work, both as a poet and as a conservationist, is clearly evident. 'Truly,' McKinney concludes, 'we stand "at the conflux of two eternities" '³⁶

McKinney's final work, *The Structure of Modern Thought* (1970), was written during the period of his marriage to Wright, and published posthumously. It is here that McKinney turns directly to problems of linguistic philosophy and the development of the symbol, and the book includes detailed discussions of the theories of Wittgenstein, Sapir, and Susan Langer (these authors are also cited in Wright's essays). At stake is the question of meaning itself, as McKinney investigates the problematic status of language in modern thought—also the theme of 'The Writer and the Crisis'. Wittgenstein's dictum, 'don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use', is examined at length, as is the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, according to which language is culturally relative. These theories, McKinney proposes, suggest that 'what we call "the world" is not an independent something "out there", which is the *cause* of experience, but is a *construction of experience*'.³⁷ This can be related to the subjectivist Coleridgean position criticised by Wright as symptomatic of the post-Romantic crisis in thought.

The most important sections of *The Structure of Modern Thought* are its final two chapters, 'The Word' and 'The Original Synthesis of Experience', in which McKinney outlines the philosophy of Susan Langer, and presents his own arguments on the process of language development. As McKinney states the problem, in the light of the theories of Wittgenstein and Sapir,

there would seem to be a difficulty in treating language as resulting from our seeing reality symbolically, for 'reality' is in this sense a symbol; 'reality' does not refer to an independent 'something' that causes our experience, it refers to a conjunction of complex experiences:

'reality' is itself a symbol for this experiential complex. The word 'reality' is part of the symbolic system we call language, and so language cannot be said to originate from a tendency to 'see reality symbolically'.³⁸

He posits a pre-linguistic state, in which the concept 'led a wraith-like, a vague and indeterminate existence',³⁹ and refers to Teilhard de Chardin's account of 'The Birth of Thought', according to which thought is the effect of 'instinct' (an evolutionary view, which excludes the realm of Pure Ideas).

McKinney then attempts to define the distinction between signs and symbols, quoting Susan Langer's definition of a sign as fundamentally instinctive and sensational (a 'conditional reflex'), quite different to symbol and meaning which are 'far more than sensation'.⁴⁰ 'Symbolism,' says Langer, 'is the recognised key to that mental life which is characteristically human and above the level of sheer animality'.⁴¹ This argument is fundamental to Wright's own conception of language as 'the human contribution to the natural world'. McKinney goes on to describe the experience of a child's initiation into the world of symbols, in a passage which strikingly recalls the series of poems on *The Child in Woman to Man* (most notably, 'The World and the Child'):

the child is in the process of being initiated into a complex body of common symbolic knowledge. This doesn't betray him into misinterpreting the World; it permits him to enter into the common concept, world, by participating in which he is able to transcend the limits of his own individual experience; he is able to pass from the sign-language, to which his animal relatives are confined, to the symbol-language that is the unique possession of his own kind, man.⁴²

According to Langer, the need for a symbolic system is uniquely human; 'the symbol-making function,' she writes, 'is one of man's primary activities, like eating, looking, or moving about'. But, beyond this, she proposes that symbolism is in fact essential to the thought-act itself, and that 'the thinking organism must be forever furnishing symbolic versions of its experience, in order to let thinking proceed'.⁴³ It is a short step from here to saying that the poetic act is itself the fundamental and essential human experience, and it is easy to see why Judith Wright should have found this argument so appealing. As McKinney puts it, 'to keep his thought-processes going, the individual must continually transform his immediate experience from the level of direct-sign material to the level of symbol-material'.⁴⁴ It also places experience under a double aspect, familiar to Wright's poetry: 'on the one hand, there is the established body of common concepts, a historical growth having its roots in man's pre-cultural past. On the other, there is the individual's act of judgement'.⁴⁵ The symbolic realm is thus a communal one, which relates the individual to past 'generations'. McKinney writes, 'it is in this fact that the power of symbols clearly lies: in place of a private sign, valid only here and now within the confines of the individual's own experience, you have a public symbol valid for all individuals'.⁴⁶

If we turn now to Judith Wright's own major statement on the problems of language, the essay 'The Writer and the Crisis', we find a number of parallels with McKinney's work. Like McKinney in his early writings, the poet is describing a crisis inherent in modern thought, 'a world grown relative and atomistic'.⁴⁷ This is reflected in Modernist art, in the obscure 'private' language of *Finnegans Wake*, and in Surrealism. She exempts Pound from this analysis—the aim of Imagism, she writes, is 'to harden language'.⁴⁸ She repeats Susan Langer's description of the foundation of language as a 'concept' of 'experience-in-common', but something has now changed. Language can no longer function in its absolute sense as a 'label' for personal experience which has itself been radically altered. With the breakdown of a shared world-view there is a crisis also in the word: 'man's problem is that of having outgrown his world-picture, and therefore also the language in which that picture was formulated, without having arrived at any real understanding of the meaning of that fact'.⁴⁹

Like McKinney, Wright turns to a primordialist model of experience, quoting Lévy-Bruhl's account of primitive language as 'synthetic', the 'fixitive' in which 'the subject is at the same time himself and the being in which he participates'. She follows the argument of *The Challenge of Reason* in describing how the process of Socratic 'analysis' leads to the breakdown of this synthesis, and her example, like McKinney's,

is that of the atomisation of the object in modern physics. Wright's essay is based around a discussion of Hevesi's *Essays on Language and Literature*, which canvasses opinions on the language-problem from a number of leading contemporary French writers. It is not surprising to see her concur most strongly with the view of the Symbolist poet Paul Valéry, for whom the only means of bridging the gap between experience and the world is the 'vital expression' available to poetry. She writes, 'only in their poetic use can words form a true bridge for the experience to cross from one mind direct to another.'⁵⁰ In Langer's terms, a new symbolic compact must be established, and poetry, as 'the world in which language's original core of meaning manifests itself',⁵¹ is capable of reconnecting us with original 'synthetic' meaning. In an important passage, Wright describes language as 'the vast symbol of man's relationship to the universe'.⁵² It is the tool for a revived cosmogony:

the essentially metaphorical force behind the growth of language—the extension from the named to the unnamed by bringing the two together in some dynamic relationship—is the very process of poetry. The conveying of the otherwise incommunicable by means of an image, the seizing on relational meaning, the expression of the inexpressible by metaphor, is precisely poetic method.

The source of language is not the object but the Image itself: 'the *image*, to which man contributes all that is creative in him'.⁵³

It is no digression to turn at this point to the writings of Mircea Eliade, one of the main sources for Wright's poetry. In *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade defines sacred time as 'primordial mythic time made present',⁵⁴ and likens it to a Parmenidean, perpetual reality. It is accessible via ritual, which recreates the cosmogonic world of absolute beginning: in the ritual or hierophantic act, 'we are witnessing, so to speak, the same act that was performed *in illo tempore*, at the dawn on the universe'.⁵⁵ The theoretical keys to this sacred truth are contained in symbols: in Eliade's words, 'the workings of primitive thought were not expressed only in concepts or conceptual elements, but also, and primarily, in symbols'.⁵⁶ It is not difficult to see how Eliade's theories influenced Wright's work, not only in her conception of time as the Eternal Return of ritual, but also her belief in the hierophantic power of the poetic act. Within the mythic structure of *Woman to Man*, Wright attempts precisely this recreation of the originary cosmogonic moment, and like the primordial hierophant she approaches it through symbolic ritual.

According to Eliade, the restoration of primordial time serves the function of ritual purification: 'profane time, duration strictly speaking...had to be abolished in order to reintegrate the mythical moment in which the world had come into existence, bathed in a 'pure', 'strong', and 'sacred time''.⁵⁷ Judith Wright has always maintained a strong awareness of the poet's social responsibility, and it may be possible to suggest that in *Woman to Man* and the volumes which immediately followed, Wright was carrying out McKinney's prescription for the poet in the postwar world of 'crisis'—that she was attempting to employ the symbols of her craft to purify a corrupted world. Certainly, the references to ritual destruction by fire in *The Two Fires* seem to support this. To quote Eliade again: 'by symbolically participating in the annihilation and re-creation of the world, man too was created anew; he was reborn, for he began a new life...above all, the ritual recitation of the cosmogonic myth plays an important part in healing, when what is sought is the *regeneration* of the human being'.⁵⁸ And he notes that the pronouncement of the ritual formulae is of particular use 'to stimulate poetic inspiration'.⁵⁹

Eliade's primordialism seems particularly relevant to the writings of McKinney and Wright as they have been examined here. His conception that primitive societies 'live in the paradise of archetypes',⁶⁰ and that these archetypes are revealed through myth and symbol, correlate with the symbolic theories already discussed. McKinney's belief in the need for a return to an earlier moment in the cycle of human thought, and his interest in the theory of reminiscences, is paralleled in Eliade's theory of *anamnesis*, which appears in his discussion of the Aranda 'Dream Time'. 'As is well known,' Eliade writes,

for Plato learning is recollecting; to know is to remember (cf. Meno 81). Between two existences on earth, the soul contemplates the Ideas: it shares in pure and perfect knowledge. But when the soul is reincarnated, it drinks of the spirit of Lethe and forgets the knowledge

*it obtained from its direct contemplation of the Ideas...Hence death is the return to a primordial and perfect state, which is periodically lost through the soul's reincarnation.*⁶¹

This is Eliade's myth of the Eternal Return, which had a direct influence on the poetry of Judith Wright; it is a subject which is crucial to the discussion of her earlier work which follows.

The epigraph to Wright's first volume, *The Moving Image* (1946)—'Time is a moving image of eternity'—is taken from the *Timaeus*, Plato's creation-myth. According to Plato, Time is created simultaneously with the universe; it is 'flowing' while eternity is at rest; and it represents multitude, while eternity abides in one. The *Timaeus* is the source for the neoplatonic theory of emanations, according to which the material world is a fallen reflection of the divine original: for Plotinus, time is 'a degeneration of the divine essence and a division of divine unity' (*Ennead* 3.7). The neoplatonist conceives of time as 'circulations in a circular nature'; the soul follows a spiralling path of descent into the world of generation, which it must transcend (or invert) in order to reunite with the Divine Mind of eternity. According to Proclus, 'souls, therefore, are carried round in a circle, and are restored to their pristine state, the celestial circulation remaining always the same'.⁶² The doctrine of correspondences can also be seen in this philosophy: since the phenomenal world is created through a series of emanations, everything is a fragment of the Divine Mind, and contains elements of this source. The process of reintegration from the many to the one is also the objective of the Greek 'mysteries' of Dionysos and Persephone. Plato in the *Timaeus* clearly states the Orphic role of the poet in the context:

*And Melody, with its movements akin to the revolutions of the soul within us, has been given by the Muses to him who uses their company with understanding...as an ally for the revolutions of the soul within us that has been put out of tune, to bring it back to order and consonance with itself.*⁶³

Later, he relates this to the necessity to abide by a law of correspondences:

*And the motions akin to the divine within us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. So it is they to which each of us must conform; he must correct the orbits in his head which were corrupted at our birth, by learning to discern the melodies and revolutions of the universe...and so come to the fruition of the best life, set before men by the gods, for the time that now is and the time to come.*⁶⁴

This philosophy forms the basis for a tradition of subsequent mystical and symbolic theologies, and can be found most recently in the works of Emerson and Bergson; it can also be seen as the source for the poetic theories of Blake, Shelley and the Symbolists.⁶⁵

In the title-poem, 'The Moving Image', Wright establishes the philosophical concerns of much of her subsequent writing. This early work is indebted to Eliot, both in cadence and idea, and Eliot's 'stillpoint' is implicit in the time-theme of the poem. The opening stanza of section I evokes a child's perception of the material world as an infinity; it is this Blakean perception which the adult poet as 'Maker' must recover. The reference here to 'a tree dressed in gold' prefigures the metaphysical trees of Wright's later work, and is an alchemical symbol of integration. The neoplatonic conception of the circularity of time is explicitly stated in stanza two: 'We are caught in the endless circle of time and star/that never chimes with the blood'. This is continued in the description of 'the widening spiral turning and returning' in the following stanza; the poet mourns the loss of 'the green world' of childhood—a prefiguration of the Child poems of *Woman to Man*—and longs for a miraculous restoration of this 'lost world'. In stanza four, the attitude of the speaker shifts to an acceptance of existence within the frame of time, which must be confronted through creative will ('I am the maker'). Through a vitalistic acceptance of Life—which recalls Verlaine's 'la vie est là'—the poet discovers eternity within time: 'It is this; it is here. / In the doomed cell I have found love's whole eternity'. The 'cell' is both biological unit and the prisoncell of the bondage of flesh to mortality.

Section II of the poem is set in a conventional Modernist 'waste land', which is also the Australian outback. In stanza three Wright suggests the fundamental role of the poet in revitalising this world through a Dionysian 'singing madness'. The figure of Tom of Bedlam is a recurring one in Wright's work, and is most

fully characterised in the blind singer of *Woman to Man*. Dionysian and vitalist associations are stressed here ('through whose feverish blood life poured like thunder', 'life upon life leapt from the fountaining seed') and the result is a Dionysian miracle in which straw is transformed into 'flowers of wonder'. The poem traces a cyclic return to the cosmogonic moment, 'back to a single cell', re-enacting 'the first birth and the first cry and the first death./the world of the first cell and the first man'. His song is the Nietzschean 'Song of Life', and his enchanted music, which 'grows around us, before us, behind', recalls the intoxicating Dionysian harmony described in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which rends the veil of *maya* and restores primordial unity. Section III of 'The Moving Image'—omitted from later selections—is interesting for its affirmation of the word as logos. The word 'like a knife' is symbolically linked to the primordial 'blade' separating light from darkness in the cosmology of *Woman to Man*. Significantly, the poem ends at the point where the *Woman to Man* sequence begins: 'Birth is a pain like death. Our pain has made us blind.' It is the problem of the postlapsarian condition which Wright will confront in her mature poetry.

The selection of lyrics titled 'Poems 1940–1944' contains a number of poems which have since been elevated to the status of Australian classics. As Wright herself has often pointed out, these poems (particularly 'Bullocky' and 'South of My Days') have too often been decontextualised from her oeuvre as a whole, and praised for their superficial conformity to the demands of hegemonic nationalist concerns. While these poems certainly stand in their own right, they should also be seen as early formulations of themes later explored in greater depth.

'Bora Ring', for example, deals with a subject central to Wright's later work, the annihilation of Aboriginal culture by white settlement. The destruction of 'ritual' and its replacement by 'an alien tale' is particularly significant in the light of Eliade's formulations. The 'ring' is eternity in its traditional symbolism, as ouroboros or wheel, and the invocation of 'the fear as old as Cain' recalls the descent into sin in the primal myths of occidental religion. A similar theme underlies the poem which follows, 'Trapped Dingo', where the native animal might be seen to stand for the 'native' world which preceded colonisation. The dingo's scent of 'death and fear' recalls the condition seen as universal in 'The Moving Image', and like Mad Tom the animal is another 'wild singer', a 'desperate poet' mourning the loss of 'the rebel one' (the Luciferian suggestions of this are pursued in later poems such as 'Pain'). This sequence of poems dealing with the consequences of white colonisation culminates in the account of a massacre in 'Nigger's Leap: New England'.

'To A.H., New Year, 1943' is an elegy, and naturally follows from the mourning-song for 'the lover, the maker of elegies' in 'Trapped Dingo'. It belongs with 'Waiting' and 'The Train' as a meditation on a world at war, but within Wright's poetry war is only a symptom of, or a symbol for, a broader human crisis. Here, humanity is seen by the speaker as 'a cannibal tribe' pursuing a mistaken concept of 'liberty' (for Wright, as for A.H., 'liberty is love, and has no frontiers'—the erotic doctrine of *Woman to Man*). The consolation of stanza five turns from the conventions of elegy to a broader mythos of cyclic mysteries. New Year is described in Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return* as 'a reactualisation of the cosmology, it implies starting time over again at its beginning',⁶⁶ and it is therefore no accident that Wright chooses this time for her attempt to find 'meaning in annihilation'. She invokes directly the vegetation rituals of sacrifice and resurrection described in Frazer's *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* and employed in 'The Waste Land':

*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 autumn, the time of sowing.*

The time-theme of 'circling days' is explored again in 'Waiting', and the neoplatonic aspiration is explicitly stated: 'make us whole in man and time, who build eternity'. To be 'bound' in the flesh is to be trapped in history, which is also the time of war—as in 'The Trains'. The moral of this is proven in 'The Idler', whose character pursues the ideal of the Islands of the Blessed—beyond the world of war—and 'half-forgot the seasons'. 'Half' is the important word, both here and elsewhere in Wright's work:⁶⁷ time as 'Killer' reclaims him (it 'sprang from its coil and struck his heart'), and history in the shape of 'a doom of planes' returns him to 'the hostile despotism of night'. 'Soldier's Farm' presents another aspect of this attempt to escape the world of strife; here the retired soldier finds solace in a symbolic 'gold day', and the

poem presents an Arcadian compact between mind and nature based on 'love' (both for his 'wife's body' and for the land). At the end of the poem the soldier is reincorporated into the cyclic and seasonal world he served: 'now his willing blood moves in these trees that hold his heart up sunward with their arms'.

The soldier's counterpart is the problematic figure of the 'Remittance Man', through whom Wright explores for the first time the paradoxical dualities inherent in colonial settlement. Like the Idler, the 'spendthrift' also attempts to escape his social role: he 'took to the life'. This suggests a more vital and pure form of existence (one which has Lindsayan undertones), and is stressed at the end of stanza one: he 'let everything but life slip through his fingers'. The Remittance Man might also represent the metaphysical figure of Brennan's Wanderer, as 'the freak who could never settle'. He inhabits an Australia which is also a prophetic realm ('the harsh biblical country of the scapegoat'), contrasted with an England evoked in stilted and over-elaborate phrasing.

A similar process is at work in 'Bullocky', which also imbues Australia with symbolic overtones as the country of prophets.⁶⁸ The Bullocky in his madness enters a realm beyond time ('the striding years...ran widdershins') similar to that of Mad Tom. The 'heaven and hell' of 'The Moving Image II' are paralleled by the 'fiends and angels' encountered here: in his 'mad apocalyptic dream' the Bullocky is another figure of the vatic poet. Circular time is represented by the 'crimson ring' cast by the campfire, beyond which is the 'star-struck' eternal ('centuries of cattlebells'), and a 'sweet uneasy music' which again recalls 'The Moving Image'. The 'solitary tracks' also seem cyclic, as they are continually retraced ('etched deeper with each lurching load'). The poem shifts to the present in stanza six, where the country is now cultivated by 'vineyards'; the Dionysian and Eucharistic suggestions of the vine-symbol are taken up in the poem's conclusion, which seems to depict the compact between death (the bone) and a vital life-force, the promise of the New Testament arising from the Old.

'Country Town' is another poem which deals with the experience of settlement, but extrapolates from this to a broader study of spiritual exile. This is suggested by the lament at the end of stanza one for 'another world', implying that the convicts' longing is for more than just their landscape of 'home'. Underlying the poem is the theme of rebellion, presented in the convict-songs and in the figure of Thunderbolt, and the reader recalls the destruction of the 'rebel one' in 'Trapped Dingo'.⁶⁹ The absence of rebellious will is explored in 'Brothers and Sisters'. Here the Bullocky's tracks have become a 'cul-de-sac': the cyclic has been lost altogether, and the incest-taboo prevents the characters from participating in the generative process. When Lucy 'shrivels waiting for a word', it is both the logos of 'Sonnet' ('the word that, when all words are said, / shall compass more than speech') and the invitation to marriage that would free her from their sterile compact. Lacking erotic or Dionysian will, they become 'like moths', drawn by inexorable tropism to destruction. Nature will inevitably re-consume them, their 'wall' will crack, and they will be reincorporated, leaving 'nothing at all' behind. This conclusion is meant as a contrast to that of 'Soldier's Farm': there, 'he left nothing but his love', and the distinction is crucial.

Wright rounds off *The Moving Image* with two important poems which deal with aspects of her personal history and experience, 'South of My Days' and 'For New England'. The long lines of 'South of My Days' demonstrate a new maturity in Wright's work, but the symbols she employs are consistent with those of the preceding poems: the 'circle' of days represents the generational cycle, the winter-setting evokes a fallen landscape of colonisation, and the 'leaf-silenced,/willow-choked' creek symbolises the lost water of life. Old Dan appears as a magian figure, invoking summer like 'a wave of rambler roses', as he 'shuffles the years like a pack of conjurer's cards'. The 'old honey' of his supply of stories is suggestive of the Pindaric gift, and the Pindaric blessing is inverted in the tale of the flies 'swarming like bees' who feed on the 'yellow boy'. The poem's final line, in which the old stories 'still go walking in my sleep', suggests a kind of haunting by place and memory; the choice of words here is also significant, given the emphasis Wright lays on 'still' and 'moving' in her later poems, and may be a reference to the paradox of the 'moving image'.

'For New England' is a key poem in Wright's work, establishing the theme of 'doubleness' in the context of the colonisation of the Southern Hemisphere by the North. 'I find in me the double-tree,' says the speaker, a descendent of the original female settler, who might be a representation of Wright's Eve, 'fighting the foreign wind'. Wright's theme is the imposition of European symbolism on Australia, and the country's resistance to it, summed up in the description of a poplar—'the Gothic tree's on fire'—undercut

by 'with blown galahs'. In order to create unity from 'division'—the goal of the mystic—the speaker must make herself an Eve-figure, with all the incorporative powers of the Maker: 'orchards fruit in me and need no season'. Wright is already looking towards the affirmation of female power in *Woman to Man*, and this stanza prefigures the imagery of poems such as 'Woman to Child'. It might be said that in *The Moving Image* Wright marks out the boundaries of the problems she seeks to resolve as a poet; in the volumes which follow she commences the process of finding solutions.

1 Thompson, Poetry in Australia: Judith Wright, reprinted in Brian Kiernan ed., *Considerations* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977) p.73.

2 Moore, The Quest of Judith Wright, reprinted in A.K. Thomson, *Critical Essays on Judith Wright* (Jacaranda 1968).

3 Wright, *Because I Was Invited* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975) p.65.

4 *ibid.*, p.67.

5 *ibid.*, p.71.

6 *ibid.* p.67.

7 A similar process can be seen in her Brennan Centenary Memorial Lecture, where she writes that Brennan like all Romantic and Symbolist poets is essentially opposed to utilitarian materialistic pluralist society (p.76) precisely the society Wright herself attacked both in her poetry and political life.

8 *ibid.*, p.73.

9 *ibid.*, p.74.

10 *ibid.*,

11 *ibid.*, p.75.

12 *ibid.*, p.76.

13 *ibid.*

14 The Bride and Bridegroom appear explicitly in *The Two Fires*.

15 Wright, *op.cit.* p.77.

16 *ibid.*, p.79.

17 Walker, *Flame and Shadow* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991) p.69.

18 Wright, *op.cit.* p.79.

19 *ibid.*, p. 130.

20 *ibid.*, p. 132.

21 *Meanjin* vol.1, p.36.

22 McKinney, The Poet and the Intellectual Environment, *Meanjin* vol.2.

23 *ibid.*

24 McKinney, *The Challenge of Reason* (Brisbane: The Mountain Press, 1950) p.8.

25 *ibid.*, p.29.

26 *ibid.*

27 *ibid.*, p.42.

28 *ibid.*

29 *ibid.*, p.43.

- 30 *ibid.*, p.49.
- 31 *ibid.*, p.75.
- 32 *ibid.*, p.83.
- 33 *ibid.*, p.86.
- 34 *ibid.*, p.88.
- 35 *ibid.*, p.105.
- 36 *ibid.*, p.106.
- 37 McKinney, *The Structure of Modern Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), p.187.
- 38 *ibid.*, p.222.
- 39 *ibid.*, p.224.
- 40 *ibid.*, p.239.
- 41 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.239.
- 42 *ibid.* p.242.
- 43 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp.246–247.
- 44 *ibid.*, p.247.
- 45 *ibid.*, p.248.
- 46 *ibid.*, p.262.
- 47 Wright, *Because I Was Invited*, p.168.
- 48 *ibid.*, p.167.
- 49 *ibid.*, p.169.
- 50 *ibid.*, p.173.
- 51 *ibid.*, p.174.
- 52 *ibid.*, p.175.
- 53 *ibid.*, p.177.
- 54 Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader* ed. Beane and Doty (New York: Harper, 1976) vol.1, p.33.
- 55 *ibid.*, p.36.
- 56 *ibid.*, p.37.
- 57 *ibid.*, p.43.
- 58 *ibid.*, p.44.
- 59 *ibid.*, p.45.
- 60 *ibid.*, p.48.
- 61 *ibid.*, p.55.
- 62 Quoted in G.M. Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (University of North Carolina Press, 1961) p.139.
- 63 *Timaeus*, trans. A.E.Taylor (London, 1929) p.46.
- 64 *ibid.*, p.97.

65 See Paul Shorey, *Platonism: Ancient and Modern* (Berkeley, 1938), for a discussion of these influences.

66 Eliade, *op.cit.* p.43.

67 See, for example, *Half-Caste*, which describes a figure who exists outside the cycle of time half-caste between life and death. This world of pre-birth and afterlife is explored more fully in later poems such as *The Unborn*, *The Bones Speak*, and *Halfway*.

68 The pillars of the Bullocky's camp recall the vibrant pillars of Baudelaire's *Correspondences*, confirming this as a Symbolist landscape.

69 The vital figure of Thunderbolt returns in *South of My Days*; he is seen on Hungry Hill, prefiguring Manjack in *Pain*, a vision of famine. Thunderbolt also seems touched by Tom's Dionysian madness: He went like a lunny, / him on his big black horse.

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