

Original Article

Reflections of Australia in Judith
Wright's Poetic Imagination:
The Power of Ambivalence in *The Gateway*

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In 1953, Judith Wright (1915-2000), one of the greatest Australian poets, published her third anthology, *The Gateway*, in which she developed her own poetic perspective on Australia. The poems collected in this work create several kinds of images about a gateway symbolizing the moment and place that every existence changes. The poet constructs a tense panorama of many scenes; the austere drought and flood in Australia, the death of the creatures and human beings, some legends and myth about death and rebirth, and human spiritual resurrection through love. The influence of European poets is seen in the way she incorporates metaphysical devices in her poems, the use of which creates both ambivalent feelings and ambiguous attitudes towards contrastive themes and ideas. Death-in-life versus life-in-death taking place in the Australian wilderness makes her insight deeper, and terror versus relief in our human feelings pervades in the poems' lines. The difficult adventures and toilsome colonization by immigrants left their offspring fruits of their harvest contrasts with the lives of aboriginals who were sacrificed by the whites' colonization but who can still recount the legends that have continued to provide power enough to survive. These patterns of life echo throughout Judith Wright's poetry.

Key Words: Judith Wright, Australian poems, *The Gateway*, Poetic patterns, Death and resurrection

Introduction

Judith Wright's third anthology, *The Gateway*, shows how she continued to develop successful poetic possibilities after writing *Man and Woman* (1949) [1]. The emphasis on several Australian native materials and her symbolic devices create her own poetic world [2], and in *The Gateway*, she emphasizes the mysterious aspects of nature which she calls the 'Dark Gift.' The central theme is death and the power of resurrection within Australian nature that we, human beings, cannot ever understand in its entirety. Just as the root of a

flower goes down in the night and makes the base for blooming, her poetic imagination waits for the words that come out to build her own image of Australia itself. "Open, green hand, and give/the dark gift you hold," she writes, using an evocative plant metaphor.

This anthology consists of 46 poems. The central pattern of the poems is clear as the poems progress and is a metaphysical fusion of the contrastive elements of death-in-life versus life-in-death, darkness versus brightness, transition versus eternity, terror versus relief, damage versus recovery, the European settlers versus the Aborigines, and so on. The skillful development of these themes is remarkable and this anthology is worthwhile for the readers of Judith Wright's poems. Moreover, we can observe the literary influence of the foreign

poets of the age like T. S. Eliot. Since she traveled Europe when young [3], Judith Wright was able to share ideas with the other poets of her age which aimed at defining and attaining universal values still relevant in modern times. In this sense, Judith Wright remains our contemporary. Her desire to preserve natural circumstances, her address against using the atomic bomb citing the disastrous results of Hiroshima, and other protest activities coincide with her conviction that we should strive to make efforts in our lives and in this world [4]. This attitude is reflected in all her works, both in her poems and in her other writings.

In the first part of this paper, her poems which show the destructive force of Australian nature that bring death to living beings are examined. Australian flora and fauna not only have enough power to survive, but also become the inspiration for the poetic materials of the poet. The next section deals with the images of men who have to face one of life's gateways, death. Some of them have fear of death while others wait for rebirth. The third section is about rebirth in Australian myths and legends which shows a progress towards the mystical in the poet's world. The final part discusses the power of love to create spiritual resurrection in the present-day world from Judith Wright's unique point of view.

I. Nature and Living Beings

1. *Natural Menace in the Australian Climate*

Australia, Judith Wright's country, has enormous natural variety. People there can enjoy the Mediterranean-like climate in Sydney or Melbourne, and a semi-tropical one in Brisbane. But in the heart of the country, the central part, the severe dryness of the desert torments all creatures, including human beings. Especially in a drought year, living conditions become intolerable. In "Drought Year" the poet describes the disastrous situation of the drought: the heated air 'burned to the root of the timber and grass,' the creek turned into sand, where the dingoes' cry was heard strangely:

I heard the dingoes cry
in the whipstick scrub on the Thirty-mile Dry.
I saw the wagtail take his fill
perching in the seething skull.
I saw the eel wither where he curled
in the last blood-drop of a spent world. [5]

At the time of the summer solstice, the 'raging sun in his pale sky' adds to the feeling of dryness, and further, 'dust has choked the shriveling tree.' Judith Wright lets the curlew tell the destruction of the world brought about by the drought, as if the bird, the poet, and the maker of the world are one:

This is my world that dies with me,
cries the curlew in the night.
I have forgotten how the white
birdfooted water in the creek
used in spring to call and speak.
All is fallen under the sun
and the world dies that once I made. [6]

As the dark of the world invades the area, plants as well as animals, both personified, wither and lament their destiny. The 'dried corn out of the earth,' says, 'the seed I cherished finds no birth.'

While the silent dryness under the sun scorches all living beings that need water to live, violent floods can also destroy frail lives suddenly and without warning. In "Flood Year," the poet describes a dead child's hand which was found with driftwood on the beach in the evening. 'I,' the narrator of this short poem, walking there saw 'a frail bleached clench of fingers dried by wind,' alluding to the child's death in the flood. The fierce force of the disastrous water devoured everything: herds were dragged away by the current, farms drowned, and the land was ruined:

Oh with a wild sound water flung into air
where the sea met river; all the country round
no heart was quiet. I walked on the driftwood sand
and saw the pale crab crouched, and came to a stand
thinking, A child's hand. The child's hand. [7]

The dry, flat earth cannot cope with the sudden excess water, and floods are a common disaster in many parts of Australia. Drought, floods, and bush-fires remain a natural menace for the Australian people.

2. *Cyclical Aspects in the Life of Plants and Animals*

Many Australian native plants and animals become Judith Wright's poetic subjects and she often attaches her own symbolic meanings to them. When the poet was searching for suitable materials to write these poems, she and her husband, Jack McKinney, were reading philo-

sophical works by Carl Jung, which explain some of the archetypal patterns seen in her poems [8]. Other clues to her poetic inheritances come from the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, an idea often reflected in ancient European writings. The plants and the animals that the poet describes are divided into two groups: one is used to represent passive and frail victims, while the other shows powerful and confident beings suggesting people who are independent and strong. "The Cedars" deals with the trees standing after the dry and cold winter when frost 'crumbles the dead bracken, greys the old grass, /and the great hemisphere of air goes flying/ barren and cold from desert or polar seas.' In spring, the trees and grasses grow their new leaves and flowers, but these changes need energy that they do not want to use:

Spring, returner, knocker at the iron gates,
Why should you return? None wish to live again.
Locked in our mourning, in our sluggish age,
we stand and think of past springs, of deceits not
yet forgotten.

.....
For it is anguish to be reborn and reborn:
at every return of the overmastering season
to shed our lives in pain, to waken into the cold,
to become naked, while with unbearable effort
we make way for the new sap that burns along old
channels — [9]

The cedars, personified as exhausted human beings, hang their hands and resist being reborn. The old trees 'have no songs left' and ask spring to hold back its 'fires that would sear' them into flower again. But around their roots the other grasses make their buds ready, and a snake begins to move, feeling 'the sunlight's finger.' The things around the cedars urge them to awaken and the day of resurrection is coming near.

Some of the earth's creatures undergo metamorphosis, transforming from cocoons to a final, different shape. The cocoons of the cicadas in "The Cicadas" are described 'the blind nymphs' underground' and have been sleeping for several years. They have been 'hanging on the tree's blood dreamed vaguely in the dreams of the tree,' and on a hot day:

In the hard shell an unmade body wakes
and fights to break from its motherly-enclosing
ground.

These dead muse dig their upward grave in fear
to cast the living into the naked air. [10]

The birth as a cicada begins and terrible is 'the pressure of light into the heart,' which displays that 'while unaware' it prepared its eyes and 'while in sleep' it learned the song the world sings. The poet encourages, 'Sing now, my brothers; climb to that intolerable gold.'

In spite of outer influences and changes that force them to struggle, the flora and fauna in our natural world, not including humans, are essentially perfect, even though they suffer in their progress through life. Judith Wright sometimes compares the condition of human misery with the absolute perfection of plant and animal life, and observing them, she reflects on human incompleteness, 'Whatever the bird is, is perfect in the bird' and, 'Whatever the bird does is right for the bird to do,' she writes in "Birds." She depicts a weapon kestrel's figure as a blade's curve, a thrush as a motherly and gentle image, and a fruit-green parrot as a wise and active being. But human cleverness and desire have destroyed the others' existence and parts of our earth, and so she laments, 'I am torn and beleaguered by my own people':

If I could leave their battleground for the forest of
the bird
I could melt the past, the present and the future in
one
and find the words that lie behind all these languages.
Then I could fuse my passions into one clear stone
and be simple to myself as the bird is to the bird.
[11]

The static and still comfort provided by flora is also a pattern that recurs in Judith Wright's poems. In "The Flame-tree," she asks, 'How to live, I said, as the flame-tree lives? /— to know what the flame-tree knows; to be / prodigal of my life as that wild tree / and wear my passion so?' Here the Australian native tree, the flame-tree, receives the blessings of nature, namely a 'lover's knot of water and earth and sun.' Judith Wright speaks to the flame-tree, asking,

How shall I thank you, who teach me how to wait
in quietness for the hour to ask or give:
to take and in taking bestow, in bestowing live:
in the loss of myself, to find? [12]

The flame-tree is a strong and powerful symbol with numerous meanings explored in several other poems. The scarlet blossoms of the tree are compared with a living ghost of death because the color of the flower reminds us of blood and wounds, which are scattered but eventually restored by the tree's efforts though the earth continually tries to take them from her.

II. The Human Gateway of Death

Some of the poems Judith Wright wrote at this time show T. S. Eliot's poetic influence, especially that of *The Waste Land* (1922). In *The Waste Land*, the fisher King whose kingdom is short of rain listens to the blind Tiresias who foretells the suffering of the people in the barren and dry land. For resurrection to occur, the voice of thunder tells of the necessary remedy which is life-in-death and love. The old man in Judith Wright's "The Old Man" has lost the clue for being reborn mentally, his eyes are blind as he stands on the ploughed red soil thinking of the spring rain, a symbol of rebirth. But action can also lead men to death. The pilot in "The Journey," was chosen to search for 'the Blessed Isles' alone at the end of the sea. He is guided by the eternal Voice that 'everywhere/ follows the farmer, the citizen, the man of the air' and 'knows the mind of everyone.' After he flies over the sea and into a cloud, a sudden mechanical problem happens and his plane falls over the cliff side:

How appalling is the terror and the weight of love!
In the explosion of that instant revelation
the body is lost that washes under the wave
and all is lost but the knowledge of that death.
.....
the bones of the dead hold their vision of eternity.
[13]

The poet imagines that in death human beings lose their physical bodies and the terror of loss overcomes everything. However, the soul retains the last vision of eternity and the poet sympathizes with the victim's destiny which leaves only his bones behind.

Death by falling and death by drowning are themes also seen in "The Lost Man." A man was lost in a rain-forest where the humid and hot climate grows ancient ferns, poisonous plants, and trees with thorns. The thorns prick his skin and as the blood drops it looks like flowers on the stones. The narrator walks on, listening to

the sound of water from the pool where the man fell and was lost:

you must forget the song of the gold bird dancing
over tossed light; you must remember nothing
except the drag of darkness
that draws your weakness under.
To go by the water he went you must find beneath
you
that last and faceless pool, and fall. And falling
find between breath and death
the sun by which you live. [14]

The Australian flora reveals a variety of colors and shapes, and in a rain-forest, together with many species of animals, men become only a part of the native world. In the unknown realm of these forests, death waits everywhere.

As an example of contrasting themes, the water that causes death in one poem nurtures life in another. In "The Ancestors," the surface of the water gathered into an unknown stream and reflected 'the sunny grass so clear,' and 'full of light.' Around the source of the water, the narrator finds the fern-trees 'locked in endless age,' and their roots spread out into the mud and stone. There, in each notched trunk, the narrator sees the images of an ancestor with 'unopened eyes, face fixed in unexperienced sorrow,' and a 'body contorted in the fern-tree shape':

That sad, pre-history, unexpectant face —
I hear the answering sound of my blood, I know
these primitive fathers waiting for rebirth,
these children not yet born — the womb holds so
the moss-grown patience of the skull,
the old ape-knowledge of the embryo. [15]

The ancient figures in the primitive forest were the very images that had been awakened in the narrator's mind, and to him/her they became visible on the trunk of the fern-trees so that we, the living, can see their wish for rebirth in the Australian nature.

III. Rebirth in Australian Myths and Legends

Australian myths and legends, originally formed by a combination of Aboriginal myths and immigrants' legends, are an important feature in Judith Wright's works. In

"Fire at Murdering Hut," the bushfire, which symbolizes the ancient element of fire, seizes the corpse of a person who had been killed and buried. The dead body has been lying there alone in the drought and the rain, until the bushfire, like 'the snake hidden' under the house where the dead had lived, or 'like a red bird,' attacks the grave. The dead body does not want to be awakened because it had been hidden in the grave, quiet and safe, a theme alluded to in *The Waste Land*.

But natural laws of human existence demand that we are born with the energy to continue living until our death in whatever way destiny calls for. The creation of many kinds of gods by the ancient people explains that people want to see these natural laws as both inevitable and just. In "Ishtar," a woman bore a child in a room while the goddess of childbirth, Ishtar, watched over the birth. Motherly femininity characterizes this poem as the narrator gently speaks to the goddess and says that 'I first felt your hand' when fearfully she became a woman. Ishtar is a shadow standing in front of the gateway to become a woman and a mother, a complex figure, a 'grave and hooded attendant.' Moreover, the goddess is concerned only about the mother's body, not about her thoughts and hopes:

Then why is it that when I at last see your face
under that hood of slate-blue, so calm and dark,
so worn with the burden of an inexpressible knowl-
edge—
why is it that I begin to worship you with tears?
[16]

Ishtar, though she is a protectress and assistant for all the women in this world, cannot completely help her wards both mentally and physically. Her goal is to facilitate childbirth and so she has no choice but to offer her support for the mothers' physical condition sometimes at the expense of emotions.

Though men are influenced by the gods that oversee our universal values, human power can sometimes reach legendary levels and attain new achievements. The adventure of a blacksmith's boy who bravely faces any fate in "Legend" is a good example where only his heart is a guide for action and morality. The narrative style is like that of a folktale and the effect is magical due in part to its repetition. The blacksmith's boy, wearing an old black hat and with a gun on his shoulder, goes out with a black dog. Nothing keeps him from continuing his journey. He

does not acknowledge natural obstacles such as bad weather, high mountains, and many ominous predictions. He perseveres and as his heart had foretold, 'in front of the night the rainbow stood on the mountain' and he could catch it in his hand. The boy 'went home as bold as he could be/with the swinging rainbow on his shoulder.'

A rainbow is meaningful symbol alluding to the rainbow serpent of aboriginal dreaming stories. Water is also one of the significant keys to understanding aboriginal myths as it makes life possible in the dry climate of Australia. The beginning of "Unknown Water" tells the story of an old man who lost a foal because of a severe drought. The narrator, 'I,' remembers the old man who knew all about cattle and livestock and who told the narrator about the tragedy of the big drought. In the second stanza, the voice of the narrator takes on the tone of an aboriginal seer. The Aborigines know 'a kind of waterhole/never dried in any drought', and the narrator continues on to say that the old man's 'own sons and daughters/have forgotten what it is to live by a water/that never dries up':

and I still believe in you, though you will not
understand me.
For the country I traveled through was not your
kind of country;
and when I grew I lost the sound of your stories
and heard only at night in my dreams the sound of
dogs
and cattle and galloping horses. I am not you,
but you are part of me. Go easy with me, old man;
I am helping to clear a track to unknown water.
[17]

Raising cattle has been the main livelihood for many immigrants from foreign countries and their descendants in Australia. Water is essential for the lives of both men and cattle, especially in times of drought. The Aborigines use special rocks and trees as signposts to tell their descendants about the springs and creeks of 'unknown water' for centuries and were able to tap these water sources while foreigners remained ignorant of their existence. Judith Wright was a staunch defender of aboriginal rights and environmental protection, and thus "Unknown Water" is significant in terms of being a symbol for rebirth and for expressing the poet's attitude towards Australian natural resources.

IV. Through the Gateway with Love

As a fifth-generation immigrant from Europe and the daughter of a wealthy cattle breeder in New South Wales, Judith Wright knew very well about both sides of life in Australia: the toilsome everyday life of the immigrants from the time of the earliest settlements in Australia, and the primitive but suitable life of the Aborigines in the harsh red earth of Australia. This awareness allowed a kind of exodus for Judith Wright as a poet and as a woman from the age-old stages of life through to her own experiences encompassing three levels: first, a recognition of her ancestors' images and memories within the Australian cultural background; second, facing the realities of life with her partner and soul mate; and third, her parent-child relationship with her daughter.

Her ancestors appears in "Eroded Hills," and whose image is that of a destroyer of nature where 'my father's father stripped' the hills to cultivate. Further, in "Old House," the poet describes an old house with a great broken tree and where a magpie's voice can be heard:

that redhaired man my great-great-grandfather,
his long face amiable as an animal's
and thought of vines and horses.
He moved in that mindless country like a red ant,
running tireless in the summer heat among the trees —
the nameless trees, the sleeping soil, the original river

—
and said that the eastern slope would do for a
vineyard. [18]

Down by the river, people make up songs about him as the wagons, the cattle, the children and the women gather around. Only the river itself flows on after all the images and songs vanish down the river. And again, around the old house, 'the dying pepperina, / clutches in its hands the fragments of a song.'

Judith Wright's relationship with her partner, Jack McKinney, is reflected in a few poems in this anthology. "All Things Conspire," "Our Love Is So Natural," and "Song for Easter" are poems in which she confesses her love feelings towards him. In particular, Easter is a time of resurrection and rebirth and the images depict solitary but independent human beings:

Who is it singing on the hill at morning,
and who runs naked down the beach at evening,

and who is ferried by the starless sea
to wake again upon the wave of morning? [19]

Easter represents many things: it is love for the girl, a secret for the boy, the sun for the man drawing nets, and him/herself for the child in the poem. But for the poet, it is for her husband, as she says, it is 'for you I make my song of Easter.'

The poet's motherly affections bring forth another aspect of the poetic world where she emphasizes that we have to go through the gateway towards resurrection with love. She knows very well that a child does not yet recognize the difference between his/her outer world and inner world. Everything becomes one in his/her mind. In "To a Child" she says,

When I was a child I saw
a burning bird in a tree.
I see became *I am*
I am became *I see*. [20]

When the poet was walking peacefully in the bush during a frosty winter dawn when suddenly she saw a rabbit leap and get caught in a trap. It is a reminder that death is waiting everywhere, and often we wonder what meaning our lives have. But the poet's voice is like a seer's voice:

I think of this for you.
I would not have you believe
the world is empty of truth
or that men must grieve,

but hear the song of the martyrs
out of a bush of fire —
"All is consumed with love;
all is renewed with desire." [21]

The people of the last century have lived in fear of destruction by atomic bombs, and the poet herself realizes this danger. Whenever and wherever we see children playing, we must remember her words in "Two songs for the World's End" about these bombs of destruction that 'ripen on the leafless tree / under which the children play.'

Conclusion

The last poem, *The Gateway*, has the same title as

the anthology itself. In this poem, the gateway is that 'of the dead,' in which the traveler, 'I,' keeps his/her pride and continues to proceed. The atmosphere of the place reminds us of purgatory, the middle domain between paradise and hell. Here in 'the land of oblivion' among 'the black-mouthed ghosts,' the river and the path to be followed have vanished and the narrator's self has also slipped away.

The gateway, as a metaphor of a transition to a different and unknown place, is one that evokes anxiety, anticipation of change, and hope to the readers of the poems of this anthology. Australian nature always provides a gateway to death for all living beings. Its flora and fauna suffer the power of natural disasters, dryness, and floods, but are able to continue their species' survival. Human death, on the other hand, has formed another gateway through the legends of Australian history in which myths show human efforts to live, succeed and be reborn. Finally, Judith Wright's poetry implies that only love is strong enough to enable our passage through the gateway towards spiritual resurrection in this complex, modern world. In this sense, all things around us can become our own gateway to change:

And the mind's nightmare
is the world's sweet wellspring
(the traveller said). [22]

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